

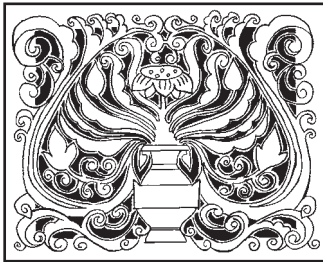


# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

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started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896*

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*Amrita Kalasha*

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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## Prabuddhabhārata prati: *To the Awakened India*

January 2008  
Vol. 113, No. 1

*To the Awakened India*, Swami Vivekananda's stirring mandate to this journal and to the heart of awakened India, written in Srinagar in June, 1898 to mark the re-awakening of the *Prabuddha Bharata* under the editorship of Swami Swarupananda—after its short rest following the death of the first editor, B R Rajam Iyer—has been rendered into Sanskrit by Sri K Ramakrishna Warriar of Chennai.

एकवारं पुनश्चापि जागृहि त्वं यतो हि तत् ।  
स्वाप आसीन्न मरणं तथा तस्याशयोऽस्ति यत् ॥  
नवीनं जीवनं तुभ्यं पद्माक्षिभ्यां च विश्रमम् ।  
आनयेच्च ततो भूयः प्रगल्भं दर्शनं भवेत् ॥  
हे सत्य भुवनं सर्व व्यसने निपतत्तव ।  
प्रतीक्षां कुरुते न स्यात्कदापि मरणं तव ॥

Once more awake!

For sleep it was, not death, to bring thee life  
Anew, and rest to lotus-eyes for visions  
Daring yet. The world in need awaits, O Truth!  
No death for thee!

आरभस्व पुनश्चापि त्वदीयं गमनं पुरः ।  
मृदुभ्यां चरणाभ्यां यौ मार्गपार्श्व अधो भुवः ॥  
पतता रजसेनापि हन्यातां शान्तविश्रमम् ।  
तथापि तौ शक्तिमन्तौ स्थिरौ चापि सुखावहौ ॥  
निर्भयौ च स्वतन्त्रौ च हे जागरणकारक ।  
पुरो गच्छ सदा वज्रकल्पां वाचमुदीरय ॥

Resume thy march,

With gentle feet that would not break the  
Peaceful rest even of the roadside dust  
That lies so low. Yet strong and steady,  
Blissful, bold, and free. Awakener, ever  
Forward! Speak thy stirring words.



त्वदीयं भवनं नष्टं यत्र सखेहमानसाः ।  
 त्वत्पोषणमकुर्वश्च वृद्धिं ते हर्षपूर्वकम् ॥  
 अवैक्षन्त परं दैवं भवत्यत्यन्तशक्तिमत् ।  
 नियमो भवतीत्येवं वस्तूनि सकलान्यपि ॥  
 निजशक्तिं नवीकर्तुं प्रत्यागच्छन्ति सर्वदा ।  
 तदेवमूलस्थानन्तु यत्रोद्भूतानि तानि च ॥

Thy home is gone,  
 Where loving hearts had brought thee up and  
 Watched with joy thy growth. But Fate is strong—  
 This is the law—all things come back to the source  
 They sprung, their strength to renew.

आरभस्व नवां यात्रां तस्मान्जन्मस्थलान्तव ।  
 यत्राश्चर्याणि नव्यानि निर्मातुं मेघवेष्टितम् ॥  
 हिममाशास्ते स्वस्यैव बलं न्यस्यत्यपि त्वयि ।  
 एकीकरोति गानं स्वं शाश्वतं स्वर्गनिम्नगा ॥  
 त्वदीयनादसहितं तथा शान्तिमनश्वरीम् ।  
 देवदारुतरुच्छायाः प्रयच्छन्ति सदापि ते ॥

Then start afresh  
 From the land of thy birth, where vast cloud-belted  
 Snows do bless and put their strength in thee,  
 For working wonders new. The heavenly  
 River tune thy voice to her own immortal song;  
 Deodar shades give thee eternal peace.

उपर्येतस्य सर्वस्य वर्तते हिमवत्सुता ।  
 उमा सौम्या विशुद्धा च माता सा शक्तिरूपिणी ॥  
 सर्वेषु स्थितिरूपेण निवसत्येव सर्वदा ।  
 करोति सर्वकर्माणि प्रपञ्चयति संसृतिम् ॥  
 एकेन ब्रह्मणा यस्याः कारुण्यं सत्यगोपुरम् ।  
 उद्घाटयत्यनेकेषु दर्शयत्येकमेव च ॥  
 अक्षय्यं हि बलं यद्धि प्रेमापरिमितं मतम् ।  
 सा नित्या परमा प्रीता तत्ते यच्छतु सर्वदा ॥

And all above,  
 Himala's daughter Uma, gentle, pure,  
 The Mother that resides in all as Power  
 And Life, who works all works and  
 Makes of One the world, whose mercy  
 Ope the gate to Truth and shows

The One in All, give thee untiring  
Strength, which is Infinite Love.

आशासन्तेऽखिलान् युष्मानृषयस्ते महाशयाः ।  
कालो वा प्रकृतिर्वा यान् स्वायत्तीकर्तुमक्षमा ॥  
जातीनां जनकैर्ज्ञात्वा समं सत्यस्य मर्मकम् ।  
मन्दामन्दगिरा लोके प्रागल्भ्येन प्रचारितम् ॥  
भृत्यो भवसि तेषां वै तेन त्वं लब्धवानसि ।  
एकं सद्वस्तु न द्वैतमिति गुह्यं ध्रुवं मतम् ॥

They bless thee all,  
The seers great, whom age nor clime  
Can claim their own, the fathers of the  
Race, who felt the heart of Truth the same,  
And bravely taught to man ill-voiced or  
Well. Their servant, thou hast got  
The secret—'tis but One.

तर्हि त्वं प्रिय भाषस्व तथा पश्य कथं तव ।  
सौम्यशान्तगिरामग्रे द्रुवन्त्यः सन्ति कल्पनाः ॥  
क्रमेण शून्यतां यान्ति तावत्त्वप्नाः प्रतिक्षणम् ।  
यावत्सत्यं महिम्नि स्वे केवले राजते परम् ॥

Then speak, O Love!  
Before thy gentle voice serene, behold how  
Visions melt and fold on fold of dreams  
Departs to void, till Truth and Truth alone  
In all its glory shines—

आख्याहि लोकमित्येवं भव जागरितस्तथा ।  
उत्तिष्ठ पश्य मा स्वप्नं कदापि त्वमतः परम् ॥  
स्वप्नानां देश एषोऽस्ति यत्र संस्कारमात्मनाम् ।  
प्रयुज्य तन्तुहीनानि माल्यानि मधुरैरुत ॥  
क्षतप्रदेशं कुसुमैरुयन्ते कर्मणा सदा ।  
तत्पुष्पाणां यतो जन्म शून्यतामध्य एव च ॥  
ततस्तान्येव वर्तन्ते वृन्तमूलं विना सदा ।  
सत्यस्यात्यन्तसुखिग्धनिःश्वासेन मुहुर्मुहुः ॥  
सरभसमाकृष्यन्त आदिमां शून्यतां प्रति ।  
धीरो भव सदा चापि सत्यं तत्सम्मुखीकुरु ॥



त्वमेकीभव तेनैव स्तब्धाः सन्तु च कल्पनाः ।  
 यद्येतत्कार्यमथवा त्वया कर्तुं न शक्यते ॥  
 तर्हि त्वं केवलं पश्य स्वप्नान्सत्यतरान्खलु ।  
 शाश्वतस्य महाप्रेम्णो निष्कामकर्मणस्तथा ॥

And tell the world—

Awake, arise, and dream no more!  
 This is the land of dreams, where Karma  
 Weaves unthreaded garlands with our thoughts  
 Of flowers sweet or noxious, and none  
 Has root or stem, being born in naught, which  
 The softest breath of Truth drives back to  
 Primal nothingness. Be bold, and face  
 The Truth! Be one with it! Let visions cease,  
 Or, if you cannot, dream but truer dreams,  
 Which are Eternal Love and Service Free.



## TO OUR READERS

**I**F *religion* is commonly taken to mean cult or dogma, *spirituality* usually evokes notions of mystical visions and experiences that are somehow unrelated to our usual run-of-the-mill perceptions. Even when natural phenomena or mundane events are found to induce spiritual experiences, the experiences in themselves have usually been reported as being far from ordinary.

But is spirituality that exotic a phenomenon? Is it something that can be apprehended only in solitude, in moments of quiet, in the depths of meditative absorption? Are our day-to-day acts and experiences irrevocably alienated from the realm of the spiritual? Conversely, are the mundane acts of spiritual people somehow unlike ours, their perceptions lit up differently?

In this special annual number we have tried to

seek answers to such questions, not from the philosopher's or theologian's viewpoint, but in the experiences and actions of people who could otherwise pass as ordinary. The answers are largely anecdotal in nature; so the judgment about the questions posed above must rest with you. If you have thoughts or experiences to share, do write to us.

With this number *Prabuddha Bharata* steps into its hundred and thirteenth year of publication. We take this opportunity to offer our greetings and good wishes to all of you—our readers, contributors, reviewers, advertisers, and well-wishers—who have been helping us disseminate the insights of Vedanta as envisioned by Swami Vivekananda. With your help, we hope to reach these thoughts to more people this year; that should surely help make this year memorable for many people.

## EDITORIAL

# Are We Spiritual?

**A**GHORAMANI DEVI, Gopala's mother, is famous as the devotee of Sri Ramakrishna who, by dint of her devotion to japa, attained the grace of having Gopala, the child Krishna, actually live and sport with her. Narendranath was then still some years from becoming the famous Swami Vivekananda. He was much inclined towards thinking of God as formless and had a general aversion towards deities and their worship in images. Sri Ramakrishna, who would never disturb anyone's faith, decided one day to have Gopala's mother narrate her experiences to Narendranath—for that would surely be interesting. Having overcome her initial reticence—for visions cease to appear if they are discussed with others—Gopala's mother told Narendranath how she walked to Dakshineswar with Gopala in her arms—she could distinctly see his purple feet dangling at her breast—how he grumbled when he did not get a pillow to rest his head on, how he collected firewood for her, and how naughty he was with his food. 'My child,' she said to Narendra, 'you are learned and intelligent; I am destitute and ignorant. ... Please say if these experiences of mine are mere imaginations or realities.' With tears in his eyes, Narendra assured her, 'Mother, what you have seen is all true.'

Many years later, Sister Nivedita visited Gopala's mother in her austere little cell by the Ganga, 'enshrining her silent intensity of peace'. When Swami Vivekananda heard of this visit he remarked, 'Ah! This is the *old* India that you have seen, the India of prayers and tears, of vigils and fasts, that is passing away, never to return!' But was the world of visions and realizations that characterized Gopala's mother's being also to pass away? The world that was so very tangible to Swami Brahmananda—who saw the Devi Kanyakumari as 'an eight- or ten-year-old girl, giggling', 'a beautiful, awesome,

divine form', and found Mahavira Hanuman visiting the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service at Varanasi to listen to *Ramanama-sankirtana*? Were the embrace of Vishwanatha Shiva or the vision of the triple-plaited Triveni at Prayag that Swami Vijnanananda was vouchsafed purely subjective realizations, the doors of which are barred for us in the twenty-first century?

Sri Ramakrishna has pointed out that spiritual inclinations as well experiences vary with one's nature: 'One who partakes of Shiva nature becomes a jnani, and one who partakes of Vishnu nature becomes a bhakta.' When at the earnest importunities of his attendant Baburam (later Swami Premananda), Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother to grant the latter 'a little ecstasy or other spiritual experience', Mother replied, 'He will not have ecstasy; he will have knowledge.' Incidentally, Sri Ramakrishna knew Baburam to be a *nityasiddha* (ever-perfect), and an *ishwarakoti* (godlike soul) born of the spiritual personality that was Srimati Radha, the embodiment of the ecstatic aspect (*hladini shakti*) of Sri Krishna.

The archetypal jnani is spoken of as one whose pleasure is in the Self (*atmarati*), who is satisfied in the Self (*atmatripta*), and who is content in the Self alone (*atmani eva santushta*). If this description evokes the impression of a distant personality, then that is not the image of Swami Premananda. In Bani-kanta Bandopadhyaya's words, 'Swami Premananda was truly love personified. ... The least discomfort or inconvenience faced by devotees would trouble him. Numerous devotees were attracted to the Ramakrishna Order by his artless behaviour and loving personality.' At his demise a disconsolate Swami Brahmananda remarked, 'Belur Math has lost its mother', and M (Mahendranath Gupta) said, 'Sri Ramakrishna's love aspect has disappeared.'




During his itinerant days, Swami Vivekananda famously remarked to Swami Turiyananda, 'Hari-bhai, I am still unable to understand your so-called religion, but my heart has expanded very much and I have learnt to feel. Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.' This was no passing sentiment. Many years later, when Girish Gosh interrupted an erudite discussion on the Vedic concept of Creation and asked Swamiji, 'A good deal of study you have made in the Vedas and Vedanta, but say, did you find anywhere in them any way for us out of all these profound miseries in the country, all these wailings of grief, all this starvation, all these crimes of adultery, and the many horrible sins?' the latter answered only with perfect quiet and a flow of tears. The service activities of the Ramakrishna Order bear witness that this was no impotent emotion.

According to Swami Vivekananda, 'If you really want to judge of the character of a man, look not at his great performances. Every fool may become a hero at one time or another. Watch a man do his most common actions; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man.' During the dreadful Bengal famine of 1943-4, the Order carried out extensive relief operations. When the situation had improved and relief operations were slowly being wound up, a telegram was received by Swami Madhavananda, the general secretary of the Order, requesting permission for continuation of services for a few months more at a particular centre where the situation was still grim. Swami Madhavananda asked for the financial and other details of the centre from the relief office at the Mission Headquarters and asked the members of the Relief Committee to come over for an immediate meeting. As it was already time for the noon-break and some time would be needed to hunt out the required data, the relief department requested that the meeting be held in the evening. But Swami Madhavananda insisted that the meeting be held as soon as the data was ready. On completion of the meeting, a telegram was sent forthwith to the centre to continue the relief. The swami then remarked, 'You wanted to hold the meeting in the

evening; but did you consider how many people's meals depend on that one telegram?'

In a more recent earthquake rehabilitation programme in Maharashtra, when the feasibility of providing private toilet facilities was being debated by the Mission authorities, Swami Ranganathananda wrote to the swami in charge of the rehabilitation programme: 'Think of the plight of those mothers and sisters! If you don't build these toilets for them, I will feel like weeping.' Swami Ranganathananda too ensured that his feelings found expression in concrete action.

Swami Premananda would remind the members of the Mission that 'the activities of the Mission are like the elephant's tusks [it is these that get noticed].' But, 'whatever work you may do—managing hospitals or conducting relief work—unless you have character, all will be in vain.' To underscore the meaning of 'character', M would cite the example of Arthur Wellesley, the legendary Duke of Wellington who commanded the British army that defeated Napoleon. As a youth, Wellesley was involved in a war against the Nizam of Hyderabad. The latter sent his prime minister to offer Wellesley a sum of 1.5 million rupees to help secure a favourable settlement of their dispute. Wellesley refused the offer though he was in need of money to marry. Curiously, when Wellesley returned to England, he found that Kitty Pakenham, to whom he wished to propose, had had her face disfigured by pox. Kitty herself suggested that he marry someone else. But, in this case too Wellesley carried through his resolve. 'Without such men, was it possible to defeat Napoleon?' M would say. 'What sacrifice! True, it was not for God. ... Even so, it was good. One who can make sacrifices for a mundane cause, can also make sacrifices for God. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'He who can keep account of salt, can also keep account of sugar candy.'

When we audit our own spiritual lives, checking if we are fit for spiritual visions may not be the proper thing to do. Finding out if we have kept our accounts of salt properly may well be. 

# Prabuddha Bharata—100 years ago

## The Master As I Saw Him: January 1908

**E**ven a journey round the world becomes a pilgrimage, if one makes it with the *Guru*. It was late one evening, in the Red Sea, when I brought to the Swami some perplexity of a personal nature, about the right method of helpfulness to others. It was rarely, indeed, that he would answer a question of this sort, without first turning for authority to some *dictum* of the *Shastras*. And how grateful does one become later for this fact! It was his personal opinion that one desired. But giving this, as he did, in the form of comment on some text, it went much deeper into the mind, and became the subject of much longer thought and consideration, than if he had answered at once in the sense required by the impatient questioner.

In the same way, when I had asked him what became of those who failed to keep their vows, he had gone all the way round by a beautiful Sanskrit quotation, to answer me. Even now, I hear the ring of his wonderful voice, repeating Arjuna's question:

अयतिः श्रद्धयोपेतो योगाच्चलितमानसः ॥  
अप्राप्य योगसंसिद्धिं कां गतिं कृष्ण गच्छति ॥  
कच्चिन्नोभयविभ्रष्टश्छिन्नाभ्रमिव नश्यति ॥  
अप्रतिष्ठो महाबाहो विमूढो ब्रह्मणः पथि ॥

Gita vi. 37, 38.

“With Shraddhâ beginning (but afterwards) unsteady, and with mind wandering away from Yoga, what end, does one, not gaining perfection, in Yoga, meet, O Krishna?

“Does he, fallen from both, perish, without support, like unto a cloud driven before the wind, O Mighty-armed, deluded in the path of Brahman?”

And the answer of Sri Krishna, fearless, triumphant,—

पार्थ नैवेह नामुत्र विनाशस्तस्य विद्यते ॥  
न हि कल्याणकृत्कश्चिदुर्गतिं तात गच्छति ॥

“Verily O son of Pritha, there is no destruction for him, either here or hereafter. NEVER shall one who has done good, come to grief, O my son!”

And then he drifted into a talk that I can never forget. First he explained how everything, short of the absolute control of mind, word, and deed, was but “the sowing of wild oats.” Then he told how the religious who failed would sometimes be born again to a throne, “there to sow his wild oats,” in gratifying that particular desire which had led to his downfall. “A memory of the religious habit,” he said, “often haunts the throne.” For one of the signs of greatness was held to be the persistence of a faint memory. Akbar had had this memory. He thought of himself as a *brahmacharin* who had failed in his vow. But he would be born again, in more favourable surroundings, and that time he would succeed. And then there came one of those personal glimpses which occurred so seldom with our Master. Carried away by the talk of memory, he lifted the visor for a moment, on his own soul. “And whatever you may think,” he said, turning to me suddenly, and addressing me by name, “I have such a memory! When I was only two years old, I used to play, with my Syce at being a *vairagi*, clothed in ashes and *kaupina*. And if a *Sadhu* came to beg, they would lock me in, upstairs, to prevent my giving too much away. I felt that I also was this, and that for some mischief I had had to be sent away from Siva. No doubt my family increased this feeling, for when I was naughty they would say ‘Dear, dear! all those austerities, yet Siva sent us this demon after all, instead of a good soul!’ Or when I was very rebellious they would empty a can of water over me,

saying 'Siva! Siva!' And then I was all right always. Even now, when I feel mischievous, that word keeps me straight. 'No!' I say to myself, 'not this time!'" On the present occasion, then, he went back, in similar fashion, to the Gitâ.

"The Gitâ says," he answered me, "that there are three kinds of charity, the Tamasic, the Rajasic, and the Sattvic. Tamasic charity is performed on an impulse. It is always making mistakes. The doer thinks of nothing but his own impulse to be kind. Rajasic charity is what a man does for his own glory. And Sattvic charity is that which is given to the right person, in the right way, and at the proper time. Your own," he said, referring to the incident that had brought about my question, "was, I fear, like the Tamasic charity. When it comes to the Sattvic, I think more and more of a certain great Western woman, in whom I have seen that quiet giving, always to the right person, in the right way, at the right time, and never making a mistake. For my own part, I have been learning that even charity can go too far."

His voice sank into silence, and we sat looking out over the starlit sea. Then he took up the thread again. "As I grow older, I find that I look more and more for greatness in *little* things. I want to know what a great man eats and wears, and how he speaks to his servants. I want to find a Sir Philip Sidney greatness! Few men would remember the thirst of others, even in the moment of death.

"But anyone will be great in a great position! Even the coward will grow brave in the glare of the foot lights. The world looks on. Whose heart will not throb? Whose pulse will not quicken, till he can do his best?

"More and more the true greatness seems to me that of the worm, doing its duty silently, steadily, from moment to moment, and hour to hour."

How many points on the map have received a new beauty in my eyes, from the conversations they recall! As we passed up the coast of Italy, we talked of the Church. As we went through the Straits of Bonifacio, and sat looking at the south coast of Corsica, he spoke in a hushed voice of "this land of the birth of the War-Lord," and wandered far afield, to talk of the strength

of Robespierre, or to touch on Victor Hugo's contempt for Napoleon III, with his "Et tu Napoleon!"

As I came on deck, on the morning of our passing through the Straits of Gibraltar, he met me with the words "Have you seen them? Have you seen them? Landing there, and crying 'Din! Din! The Faith! The Faith!'" And for half an hour I was swept away into his dramatisation of the Moorish invasions of Spain.

Or again, on a Sunday evening, he would sit and talk of Buddha, putting new life into the customary historic recital of bare facts, and interpreting the Great Renunciation as it had appeared to him who made it. ...

"I disagree with all those," he said, "who are giving their superstitions back to my people. Like the Egyptologist's interest in Egypt, it is easy to feel an interest in India that is purely selfish. One may desire to see again the India of one's books, one's studies, one's dreams. My hope is to see again the strong points of that India, reinforced by the strong points of this age, only in a natural way. The new state of things must be a *growth* from within.

"So I preach only the Upanishads. If you look, you will find that I have never quoted anything but the Upanishads. And of the Upanishads, it is only that one idea, *strength*. The very essence of Vedas and Vedanta and all, lies in that one word. Buddha's teaching was of Non-resistance or this Non-injury. But I think this is a better way of teaching the same thing. For behind that Non-injury lay a dreadful weakness. It is weakness that conceives the idea of resistance. I do not think of punishing or escaping from a drop of sea-spray. It is nothing to me. Yet to the mosquito it would be serious. I would make all injury like that. Strength and fearlessness. My own ideal is that giant of a saint whom they killed in the Mutiny, and who broke his silence, when stabbed to the heart, to say—'And thou also art He!' ...

"But you may ask—what is the place of Rama-krishna in this scheme?

"He is the method, that wonderful unconscious method. ... He lived that great life,—and I read the meaning."

—Sister Nivedita

# Spirituality in Daily Life

Swami Smaranananda

ONE who has ‘discovered’ one’s innermost Reality and identifies oneself with all that exists is called a ‘*sthita-prajña*’ in Chapter Two of the Bhagavadgita. The Lord tells Arjuna how such a person behaves, how he talks, how he sits and moves around. The Gita describes also the behaviour of a true bhakta, or devotee, in Chapter Twelve and the characteristics of a person who has transcended the three *guṇas* in Chapter Fourteen.

The people referred to in these contexts are extraordinary spiritual personalities who have crossed the ocean of samsara, of relative existence, and whose very sojourn on earth is a blessing to all:

*Kulam pavitrām jananī kṛtārthā  
viśvaṁbharā punyavatī ca tena;  
Apāra-samvit-sukhasāgarē’smin-  
līnam pare brahmaṇi yasya cetah.*

One’s lineage is made pure, one’s mother made blessed, and Mother Earth rendered sacred, by one whose mind is merged in Brahman, the shoreless ocean of consciousness and bliss.

Here we will deal not with such persons who have reached the highest point in spiritual life, but with sincere spiritual aspirants whose lives in the midst of society reflect the spiritual awakening in their hearts.

‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating,’ as the proverb says. What are the external signs of a God-realized soul, or rather, how does a sadhaka, one who is treading the spiritual path, behave? How is spirituality reflected in a common person whose life is circumscribed by the social conditions around him or her? What about monks who have dedicated their lives to the highest spiritual ideal?

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Men and women dedicated to spiritual values develop the ability to withstand even terrible tragedies in their lives. For example, I may mention one such incident which I had the opportunity to see personally.

A lady devotee in Kolkata suddenly lost her son, a brilliant student preparing for his Senior Cambridge [present class twelve] examinations, in a drowning accident. The lady is very much devoted to Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. Even then, when I heard about it, I felt that she would be devastated and went personally to her house to offer some consolation. But to our surprise, instead of being consoled by us, the lady tried to console us, saying, ‘The Lord gave and the Lord took him away. What is the use of sorrowing?’ This attitude was possible for her only because of her deep faith in, and devotion to, the divine personalities.

Spirituality helps to develop detachment to worldly matters and creates a sense of renunciation. I may mention the case of Dr Jiten Dutta, an unassuming bachelor whom I knew in the late nineteen-fifties. He was a man of strong opinions, but, with all that, he had a soft heart and felt for the poor. He would go to treat patients in Kolkata, but would give the fees he received to one of our girls’ schools in rural Bengal, and would have receipts issued to his patients in the name of the ashrama, as if their payments were actually donations. In this way, he donated more than a hundred thousand rupees for the said institution, which would be worth ten times the amount today!

Now I come to some of our swamis who were not well-known but who, by their simple and loving nature, were loved and respected by all who came into contact with them.

One such was Swami Shiveshananda (1894–



1975), more well-known as Dwaraka Maharaj. He lived most of his monastic life at Belur Math. He was a disciple of Mahapurush Maharaj (Swami Shivananda, the second president of the Ramakrishna Order), who lived upstairs in the old Math building where Swami Vivekananda spent his last days.

In the courtyard below stands the mango tree which was there during Swami Vivekananda's time as well. There is also a jackfruit tree and some other plants there. Dwaraka Maharaj had been told by his guru to see that the courtyard was kept clean and that leaves from the tree did not litter the place. Dwaraka Maharaj had read about Shabari, who lived an ascetic life in the forest. She had heard that Sri Rama would pass by her hermitage, and she waited and waited for months and years to have the darshan of Sri Rama. She was waiting earnestly to hear his footsteps. At last he came and Shabari's dream was fulfilled.

Similarly, Dwaraka Maharaj was always watchful to see that leaves did not litter the courtyard. As soon as a leaf fell, he would rush forward to remove it! Thus his whole mind was given to his guru, Mahapurush Maharaj.

I have seen him reciting those verses that deal with the episode of Shabari from the Ramayana in Bengali poetry, tears pouring down from his eyes. In his room was a picture of old Shabari, which someone had got for him. His was a great example of how an ordinary act can also become a practical spiritual action.

One more example: Swami Muktananda, known as Ban-baba or Banbihari Maharaj. Banbihari Maharaj spent all his monastic life at Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi. All his life he worked in the surgical department of the Sevashrama, bandaging the wounds—surgical and otherwise—of the innumerable patients who came to the hospital for treatment. With the greatest dedication he worked day after day for years together. His was really worship of the *rogi-nārāyaṇa*—God in the form of the patient. He was full of love for all, with a sweet smile. He worked tirelessly, at any time of the day, as a true karma yogi.

Ban-baba's loving and compassionate heart endeared him to one and all. For sixty years he carried on his service to the patients. People, even senior surgeons, believed that a patient would be cured if Banbihari Maharaj would but take up the dressing of the wounds and the care of the post-operative period. Invariably, it came true. He passed away in 1996 at the ripe old age of ninety-three.

Ban-baba's life is a testimony to all those aspiring to live a spiritual life in the midst of intense activity. There are many examples of swamis who had lived exemplary lives, but it is not possible to describe all these lives here.

Now let us look at a grand example from the Catholic Christian tradition, of one who, in the midst of multifarious chores in the kitchen of a monastery in seventeenth-century France, maintained the constant awareness of God's presence. His name was Brother Lawrence, and what we know about him is from a small book entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God*:

'His conversion, at eighteen, was the result of the mere sight on a midwinter day of a dry and leafless tree standing gaunt against the snow; it stirred deep thoughts within him of the change the coming spring would bring. From that moment on he grew and waxed strong in the knowledge and love and favor of God, endeavoring constantly as he put it, "to walk as in His presence".'

Thus, Brother Lawrence, in the midst of his heavy duties in the monastery, invoked the presence of God all the time. He said that we should establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with Him.

The Lord says in the Gita, '*Mām-anusmara yudhya ca*; Remember Me and fight.' So, to make our lives fully focused on God, continual effort to keep our mind on God is necessary. This method of remembering Him will make us progress spiritually, without disturbing our day-to-day activities, in whichever vocation we may be engaged.

Thus spirituality need not be confined to forests and caves. As Swami Vivekananda said, it should enter the marketplace, and the field and the fac-

tory. When all activities are infused with the leaven of spirituality, a silent revolution will come about. The real *satya-yuga* will begin. For this, continu-

ous effort in this direction—to focus one's life on God, and give it a spiritual orientation—is highly necessary.



## Realizing Our True Self

Everything reflects the glory of God. Behind our human connections there is the Divine connection: behind all human relationship there is the Divine relationship. Therefore our feeling for all should not be allowed to die. It should be transmuted. During the period of transition and transformation one may pass through a little indifference for a time. But if one holds the ideal clearly before oneself, and scrupulously follows the duties that are to be fulfilled, the former feelings return in a transmuted form, from which attachment has been eliminated, but in which the love for the Divine and the love for others through the Divine remains.

Two dangers are to be avoided. One is to love with human love and falsely call it divine. The other is to become too indifferent to even the right feeling, and be negligent of one's duties. Both are harmful to spiritual growth.

In order to be of real service to others, we should try to reflect the glory of the Divine in our own life. Then silence becomes more eloquent than eloquence itself, and if speaking be necessary, it too will prove helpful and effective. Furthermore we should practise self-surrender to the Divine in us and outside us. At present our personality is a combination of the false and the true self. As we grow spiritually, the higher self becomes more and more manifest. That which is real in us can never be lost.

Let us yearn strongly for spiritual progress and Divine realization. To the extent the Infinite is stressed, and our finite self is realized as a manifestation of the Infinite, the divine will asserts itself and we hear the inner voice, which again must never be confused with our own voice. Whatever we feel to be the Divine voice should be tested carefully by reason, and by repeatedly hearing it. The inner voice does not contradict reason, it transcends reason.

Everything is the play of the Divine. He comes to us in different forms. It is He who comes as the teacher in order to give instruction, and it is He again who comes

as the pupil to receive the instructions. Let us try to be in tune with the Divine and witness His play. Let us even become His playmate. This becomes possible only if we are able to establish our union with Him in the very depths of our being.

The secret of successful ethical and spiritual culture is to look upon oneself as a spiritual being, pure by nature, and self-luminous in its essence. Through meditation we have to drive this idea into the very depths of our consciousness, until the pure and self-luminous nature of the Self is manifest even in the body and the mind. Let us think of the Divine, the ever-pure, the Atman, the Eternal Self and assert Its glory within us. Let us always remember, even when the brain is clouded and inclined toward evil, the wonderful words of Swami Vivekananda: 'The soul is infinite, omnipotent and omniscient. Stand up. Assert yourself. Proclaim the God within you. Teach yourself—teach everyone—his real nature. Call upon the sleeping soul to see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when the sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.'

We are inseparable from this Infinite. He is the origin of all our finite consciousness. He is the Soul of our soul. If the higher consciousness becomes a little awakened in us, we can love Him even more intensely and intimately than we can love a person or even ourself. Retaining our individuality, regaining our pure individualized consciousness, let us come in touch with Him in the very depths of our being, let us awaken that inner intuition—that pure love—which makes the worshipper lose himself in the worshipped. ...

Change of mood is quite natural, and it is our ultimate task to conquer this nature and go beyond it. Conquering this second nature we must realize our primary, unchangeable, absolute nature—our true Self—the Infinite, the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute.

—Swami Yatiswarananda

# Mother's Grace

Swami Nirvikalpananda

**I**N this article, I would like to relate two touching incidents that I witnessed while I was serving at Jayrambati some years ago, and an anecdote that is told at the Jayrambati ashrama.

## Undaunted Prayer

There was an old man named Habu Munda who belonged to the Santal tribe and lived near the village of Jayrambati. He was around eighty years old, very lean and thin, and seemed to be a beggar in appearance. He would come to the Matri Mandir (Sri Sarada Devi's temple) every day, but would never enter inside the temple. Standing below the stairs, he would talk to Mother pleadingly—sometimes crying, sometimes getting angry—and act like a mad man. Without entering the temple he would touch the last step of the staircase with his forehead and leave the place. What surprised everybody was that not even heavy rains or winter cold could deter him from coming to the temple after evening arati to make his prayers! Also, if any devotee, seeing his sad, beggarly appearance, would try to give him some money, he would not accept it, and would show them the temple's donation box. One day Swami Dhireshananda came to Jayrambati and saw Habu acting abnormally outside the temple. The swami came to Rammay Maharaj (Swami Gaurishwarananda, the then-president of Jayrambati ashrama), complained about him, and asked Maharaj to take some action immediately. Habu was called and asked why he behaved in this way and what he wanted. Thereupon the old man related his story in his mixed Santal-Bengali tongue.

It so happened that when Habu was a child

he had come to Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, at Jayrambati along with his father at the time when Mother's new house had just been completed. There is a custom in the Santal community that when a guest comes to one's house for the first time, the host should call the guest near and ask about his or her home, well-being, requirements, and so on. So Habu too expected Mother to call him to her side, but Mother, being too busy with the house-opening ceremony, failed to give any special attention to him, which hurt him. But he happened to meet Sharat Maharaj (Swami Saradananda), who asked him to go once more to Mother. This time too when he went to her, she didn't pay him any attention, which pained him immensely. He returned with deep sorrow to Sharat Maharaj, and said emphatically that henceforth he wouldn't go to Mother unless she herself called him. Then Sharat Maharaj told him with affection that if he prayed to Mother wholeheartedly she would definitely bestow her grace on him. The child believed this completely and started praying to Mother. Later on he came to know that Mother had left the world. Thenceforth he started coming to the temple and praying to Mother from outside to call him near her.

Hearing this tale of unheard prayer, Swami Dhireshananda, though a staunch Vedantin, couldn't restrain his tears. Sometimes when Rammay Maharaj saw Habu, he would tease him, saying, 'Why are you wasting your time? Mother won't call you!' At this, Habu would affirm with conviction, 'No, Mother will, Sharat Maharaj has told me!' After some days, Habu's grandson came to the ashrama with the news that his grandfather was bedridden and wanted to see Rammay Maharaj. But since Maharaj was not well enough to travel, he asked us to go to see him. So some of us sadhus went to see

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the old man. As soon as he saw us he said with brightened eyes, in broken Bengali, 'Mother came! She gave darshan and called me to herself!' and repeated these words several times with unbounded joy, his face beaming with bliss. Mother had finally heard the prayers of her son and had given him her blessed darshan. How long could she restrain herself from answering the cries of her child? She had come to take him in her arms. After hearing this from us, Rammay Maharaj understood that this was the final moment, and had someone bring him *charan-amrita* (holy water) from Mother's temple before he breathed his last.

In Habu Munda we see a wonderful example of faithful prayer and devotion. And we also witness the compassionate grace of the Holy Mother, who is also the Divine Mother of the universe.

### **Steadfast Service**

The following anecdote is related to Sri Ramakrishna's temple at Garbeta. A man who served as a porter in the nearby railway station used to come to this temple. Every morning at early dawn he would come to the ashrama and sweep the entire area from the gate to the temple, meticulously removing all garbage and dried leaves; thus the temple authorities were relieved of this morning work. Prabhu Maharaj (Swami Vireswarananda, the tenth president of the Ramakrishna Order) once came to Garbeta and saw the wonderful service rendered by this man. He was highly impressed, and asked who this employee was. The monk in charge informed Prabhu Maharaj that he was not an employee but offered this service out of his own *shraddha* without being asked to do so. After seeing the poor condition of the villagers in that area, Prabhu Maharaj asked Sri Shiv Shankar Chakravarty, the then director of Ramakrishna Mission Lokashiksha Parishad, to start a project of service to the poor (Pallimangal) in Garbeta, which was launched later on.



*Temple of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi at Jayrambati*

This man, being a porter, usually carried the luggage of those ashrama guests and visitors who came by train to Garbeta. Once it so happened that when he came to the ashrama, Holy Mother's *janma tithi* or birthday celebration was going on, and a swami was speaking about Holy Mother to the devotees. In the course of his talk, the swami related the local legend behind the temple. Once, when Holy Mother was returning to Jayrambati after a pilgrimage to Puri, along with Master Mahashay ('M', the author of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*) and others, the train stopped at the Garbeta station for a long time. Mother asked the reason for this long delay and was told that the engine of the train was being filled with water and coal. Hearing this, she became excited like a child and came out of the train to see it herself. As soon as she stepped on the platform, she saw Sri Ramakrishna standing there smiling at her and then moving out of the station to some distance; then he disappeared. She told the devotees present that a temple should be built for Sri Ramakrishna in that place. In 1915 a Ramakrishna Math was started at Garbeta, and later a Ramakrishna temple was also built.

In the course of the lecture, the devotee porter heard that Holy Mother had initiated a Bihari porter at the Vishnupur railway station and had given him darshan as Mother Janaki (Sita). Being also a Bihari, he related this incident to himself. He was



a man of simple faith, and believed without doubt that Holy Mother was Mother Janaki herself, and that she would one day give darshan to him too, as she had done long before to someone who was, perhaps, some distant relative of his. This inspired him to come to the ashrama before going to his regular work every day and to do some selfless service in his own way. This he did without fail as long as he lived in Garbeta, and before leaving the place, he came to the temple with some offerings for the Holy Mother. What happened to him afterwards we don't know, but he was a great lesson to all of us in simple faith and devotion.

### **Worship with a Broom**

This is the story of another son of Holy Mother. His name was Shantiram Das. He belonged to Haldi, a village near Jayrambati. His birth itself was a blessing of the Mother. Shanti's father, Yogesh Das, was an ardent devotee of Holy Mother and regularly served Mother as a palanquin bearer. Occasionally, he would sweep and clean the compound of Mother's new house. He had five daughters and greatly yearned for a son. So one day he came to Mother and expressed his sorrow, saying, 'Mother, I have five daughters who work with their mother. If I had a son, I could have brought him here along with me and engaged him in your service. It is my humble prayer to you, Mother, that if another child is to be born to me, it should be a son. Without that I shall have no peace.' Mother thought for a while and said, 'All right, I shall pray to Thakur.' As it happened, a male child was born to him the

next year. Yogesh's joy knew no bounds; he came running to the Mother and exclaimed, 'Mother, by



*Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi*

your grace I have got a son.' Mother smilingly asked, 'So now are you at peace?' He replied, 'Yes Mother, my heart is full of peace.' Then Mother said, 'Then let the boy be named Shanti (peace).' During the boy's *annaprashan* ceremony, when the child is fed with cooked cereals for the first time, Mother gave him a pair of gold-plated bangles, which he preserved throughout his life. His family believed that after Shanti received these bangles from Mother, whom they looked upon

as Goddess Lakshmi herself, their financial condition improved greatly.

As the boy Shanti grew older, he started coming to Mother's house along with his father. Yogesh had his son on one shoulder and his youngest daughter on the other, the latter being only one and a half years older than Shanti. So whatever fruit Mother had she would divide exactly into two for the children, lest they should fight. When Shanti saw his father cleaning the compound with a broom, he too started doing the same—with difficulty, as the broom was very big for him. Seeing him struggle with the big broom, Mother procured a smaller one and gave it to him, saying, 'This is the broom for you; you can serve with this one.' Thereafter, he unfailingly continued his devotional service to Mother with great zeal and enthusiasm. A few years passed in this way, during which Shanti enjoyed Mother's unbounded love and affection.

Eventually, Holy Mother became seriously ill, and it was decided that she would move to



Shantiram Das, right, and the bangles he received from Holy Mother, above



her Calcutta residence. As Mother was about to leave, Shanti asked her with tearful eyes, 'Now for whom shall I work, Mother, whom shall I serve?' Mother replied with affection, 'My child, you shall continue your service to me, thinking that I am always present here and am always watching you. Where shall I go?' Shanti's simple heart couldn't doubt Mother's words; he continued his service to Mother daily with the same enthusiasm as before, feeling her eternal presence even after she left the mortal world.

In 1923, the Matri Mandir was established on the birthplace of Holy Mother, and the things in Jayrambati changed, but there was no change in Shanti's attitude and sincerity. In fact, his faith and devotion increased with time, and whether it was winter, summer, or the rainy season, Shanti was seen every morning with a broom in hand, serving with a blissful heart. He never accepted any money for his service, as it was all for his own Mother. On festival days he accepted a dhoti and chadar—gifts that were distributed to all. He had a job as the chowkidar (watchman) of the Haldi village and thus earned his living, but he spent most of his spare time at the ashrama.

When he became old and weak, the ashrama authorities asked him not to exert himself in hard work, but nobody could persuade him to stop his service to Mother. If somebody asked him to stop his work he would answer promptly, 'Who are you to ask me to stop? It is Mother who appointed me to this service. I am her servant. She didn't teach me any shastra or *sadhan-bhajan*; she only gave me a broom. Hence this is my sadhana, my worship to her.' His service continued until he became bed-ridden. On his last day, lying in bed, suddenly his face became bright and blissful. And he breathed his last with a smile on his face and Mother's name on his lips.

Shanti's last rites were performed with due respect at the ghat on the bank of the Amodar river at Jayrambati. He was honoured as a great devotee of Mother. The bangles which Mother had given to him are preserved by his family. Also, many of his relatives serve at the ashrama.

Countless are the living examples of Mother's grace and infinite love. She used to say repeatedly, 'I am the Mother of all.' How many of us have the kind of unbounded faith in her words that Shanti had?



# Can We Not Give Too?

Swami Divyananda

THE service activities of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inspired by the motto given by Swami Vivekananda—*atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya cha*—have been steadily expanding, for the good of many, for the happiness of many. Besides the sannyasins and brahmacharins of the Order, a large number of devotees and admirers have dedicated themselves to this service, inspired by the ideology of ‘service to humans as worship of God’. Their stories of dedicated service are often inspiring.

*Prabuddha Bharata* readers are familiar with Sri Swapan Adhikari, a sixty-two-year-old rickshaw puller who finds joy in supplying study materials to nearly two hundred poor school children every year from the savings of his hard labour (See *Prabuddha Bharata*, January 2006, 46). During the local dengue epidemic in 2005–06, Sri Adhikari got a cassette made about the disease by two doctors, hired a loudspeaker set, and played the cassette as he drove his rickshaw through Balurghat to increase awareness about the disease and its preventive measures. He also organizes medical camps with more than half a dozen physicians and specialist doctors and arranges for free medicines for several hundred students and villagers. Once Swami Vivekananda told Swami Turiyananda, ‘Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion. But my heart has expanded very much, and I have learnt to feel.’ Swamiji has also said, ‘To be good and to do good—that is the whole of religion.’ Sri Swapan Adhikari exemplifies this idea of religiosity. He prays, ‘Bless me so that I may serve the poor till the end of my life.’

Many doctors are associated with the service

activities of the Ramakrishna Mission. Dr Kamal Dawn, a general surgeon, and his colleagues have been actively involved in conducting medical camps in remote villages of Burdwan, Medinipur, and North Sunderbans in West Bengal. Dr Dawn would devote his Sundays and holidays for this and also arrange free surgeries at the district hospital. Hundreds of patients—many requiring very difficult surgeries—benefited from this. Equally important as the surgeries were the prayers that accompanied them. Once, a patient from a tribal area was operated upon for enlargement of the prostate gland, but developed serious post-operative complications, requiring multiple blood transfusions. Dr Dawn had a renowned urosurgeon come and review the patient. He then said to me, ‘Maharaj, I am going to Mother’s house for a special prayer; you also pray, please.’ His efforts and prayers did not go in vain.

Such service is capable of eliciting profound responses from the people. This I have had many occasions to experience personally. Let me cite an instance. Once we got delayed in finishing our work at Sardarpara on the banks of the river Raimangal in the Sunderbans and could not return to Kolkata. So, three of us had to spend the night at the house of Sri Sentu Mandal. After having our supper in the light of a kerosene lamp, we retired to a room that had been made free for us to sleep in. But the heat was oppressive, and after some time we quietly moved out to the courtyard with our mats to sleep in the open. I woke up early in the morning, when it was still dark, as we had to catch the first launch. To my surprise I found the whole family sleeping in the courtyard, surrounding us in a circle. I asked Sentu’s father the reason for this intriguing formation. His reply left me dumbstruck: ‘This place is notorious for tigers and snakes. You

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Swami Divyanandaji is Head, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Malda.



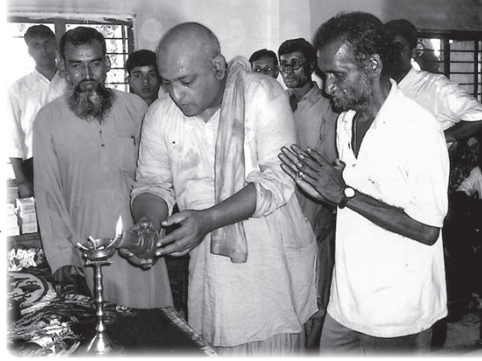
were obviously forced to move to the courtyard by the terrible heat, and fell asleep there. We did not want to disturb you. So, we thought if we encircled the three of you then a tiger or a snake could not reach you without our knowing!’

The dedication of many of the teachers serving at Ramakrishna Mission institutions has been a source of great inspiration to students. Professor P C Sen, who served as an honorary lecturer in physics at the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur, would teach students without any remuneration. He even refused the honorarium that the college offered him. Even at the age of eighty he would spend considerable time in the library. ‘I would be backdated if I did not study regularly,’ he would say. This study enabled him to teach classes on virtually any branch of physics. He looked upon the students as gods and was always keen to help them solve problems.

Professor Jyotirmoy Chatterjee was another Vidyamandira teacher who used to take classes in the same spirit as a pujari would worship in a temple. ‘If you attend my classes attentively,’ he would tell his students, ‘you need not consult books.’ And he was true to his word; he made sure he presented all the important textual material in the classes, with detailed notes and drawings. And his handwriting on the blackboard would be as beautiful as his thoughts were systematic. He never had a harsh word for anybody. But his personal sacrifice, remarkable teaching skills, and love for the students made everybody restful and attentive in class. He appeared like a rishi.

Unfortunately, his young son, who was pursuing doctoral research in physics, passed away. The Vidyamandira vehicle which was to bring Prof. Chatterjee to college reached his home just a few minutes after he got the news of his son’s demise. Keeping his calm, he came to college and conducted his classes as usual. Neither the students nor his fellow teachers could notice anything unusual in his appearance or behaviour. Only when Swami Tejasanandaji, the Vidyamandira principal, enquired about his family while he was signing the attendance register did

*Inauguration of medical camp at Badkanai Madrasa, Malda, organized by Sri Swapan Adhikari, who stands on the right*



he give out the news of his personal tragedy. How could he come to take classes on that day, the swami asked in astonishment. ‘They (the students) are my living sons, and examinations are knocking at the door,’ Prof. Chatterjee replied.

Sri Bimal Tarafdar, a farmer from Nimtala village, North 24 Paraganas, provides another example of devotion directed into service. Once he heard two monks refer to Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi’s saying: ‘He who has wealth should distribute it, and he who has not, should do japa.’ Sri Tarafdar started undertaking regular charitable work from that day onward. He had always had an inclination to serve poor and illiterate people, especially the sick. Now he started devoting a sizeable portion of his income and virtually all of his time to such activities. With the help of a doctor friend he started conducting free medical and eye camps for poor villagers in his own home. This would require him to vacate his residential rooms for a short while; he would have them properly fumigated for the camps. Scores of patients underwent successful eye operations at these camps. Medicines are also supplied free of charge. Now, with stricter regulations for surgical camps in operation, Sri Tarafdar arranges for patients to be treated at the nearest medical college. Annual blood donation camps are another important part of the medical service he conducts. Sixty to seventy young men and women donate blood voluntarily at these camps.

Swami Vivekananda has pointed out that educational and spiritual help are greater than mere physical help. Though he does not have much formal education, Sri Tarafdar is actively involved in these too. He has organized seminars on the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Sarada Devi during the traditional





KAUSTUBH RAYCHAUDHURI, CLASS 6, AGARTALA

Are we to  
always receive ...

## Prabuddha Bharata

for getting individual training. Sri Ghosh would try to make sure that he was regular in attending to his students so that they derived maximum benefit from their schooling. Now that he is retired, he is able to devote all his time and energy to the many service activities of the ashrama: flood relief (floods in Malda are an annual feature), teaching inmates of correctional homes, spreading the teachings of Swami Vivekananda in various schools—rural and urban, helping with mobile medical clinics, and serving at the community lunch for poor people. Age cannot deter him from carrying heavy loads on water-logged roads to reach people affected by floods. The challenge of delivering medical aid to remote areas may stall others, but not Sri Ghosh.

Basanti (Durga) puja at his homestead. These have been attended by people from all walks of life, both Hindus and Muslims. Nimtala and nearby villages also have separate study circles for the elders, youth, and women. Poor students are provided aid to continue their studies. Hundreds of local villagers have also been inspired to take spiritual initiation to pursue their spiritual lives more intensely. A majority of these seekers are from poor families. There are also many subscribers to the Bengali spiritual monthly *Udbodhan* in these villages. Such works as the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* and the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* are also sold at subsidized rates. Organizing *bhakta sammelans* (devotee conventions) is another important activity that engages Sri Tarafdar's attention. That such activity strikes a spontaneous cord of sympathy in others is indicated by the fact that virtually everyone in Sri Tarafdar's large extended family appreciates and participates enthusiastically in these activities; and when he suffered a cardiac ailment requiring hospitalization, a large number of villagers prayed for his recovery.

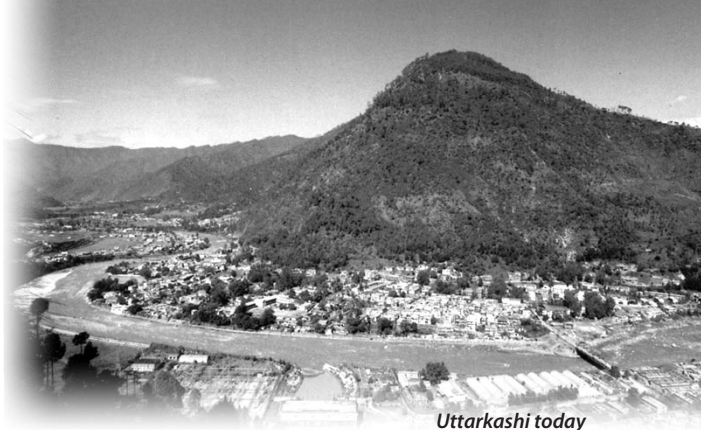
Sri Sudhangshu Ghosh, a volunteer at the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Malda, also exemplifies the spirit of service. I can still recall the day when the vehicle carrying medical aid for poor ailing villagers left the ashrama, and a man of sixty who had missed it burst into tears saying, 'Today I am deprived of serving God.' The Milki High School, where Sri Ghosh served as a teacher, has numerous students hailing from poor families who have little means

Service can prove infectious. In May 1990, a blood donation camp had been organized at Punyananda Vidyapith in Mayna village, East Medinipur. Numerous donors attended the camp despite the summer heat. A middle-aged woman went to one of the doctors in attendance and started weeping, 'Am I only to take blood? Can I not donate too?' On being asked what the matter was, she continued, 'My haemoglobin levels keep plummeting off and on, and then the doctors have to give me transfusions. My blood group is B negative. This is not a common group. On several occasions the boys of the village have had to go to Kolkata to get blood and save my life. Now that there is a camp right next door to me, I have come to donate blood; but the doctors are refusing me.' The woman worked as a labourer and was clearly of frail health. But she could not restrain her tears at not being allowed to repay the debt of blood that she had incurred. We gave her a palm-leaf fan, and she went fanning the volunteers helping at the camp. She went on doing this throughout the duration of the camp, even as she herself got drenched in sweat. Seventy per cent of our body weight is made up of water. It appeared that though the doctors had refused to take her blood, she actually did manage to give much of it through the sweat of her toil. And she left us repeating her question: 'Are we to always receive? Can we not give too?'



# Reminiscences of Some Sadhus

Swami Ramananda Saraswati



Uttarkashi today

UTTARKASHI of old had many remarkable sadhus. It was in reality Uttar-Kashi, northern Kashi. There were Swamiji (Swami Vishnudevanandaji) and Brahmaprakashji. Tapovan Maharaj was remarkable in his own way. If you asked him a question he would ask you to come the next day; he would answer you only if you went to him again the next day. If you asked Brahmaprakashji anything on the shastras, he would recite the relevant *bhashya* (commentary) or *tika* (annotation) from memory. There was Ganganandaji in Kailas Ashrama, a great yogi and teacher, a remarkable *upasaka* (meditator). You had only to approach him and sit near him and your doubts would be resolved; questions were unnecessary. Then there was Vishnu Tirthaji across the Ganga. He lived naked and would stand in the Ganga for nearly four hours every day. He was a great *tapasvin* (ascetic); the water in the Ganga at Uttarkashi is so cold that it is difficult to stand in it even for a minute. He would speak very rarely, and that too only in Sanskrit.

Tapovanji would never give any sadhu anything, not even to his attendant. All the sweets that devotees would give him he would either give to the local hill people or throw in the Ganga, but he would not give them to any sadhu. Brahmaprakashji, on the other hand, would invite sadhus to share whatever he received. I was young then, and used to visit Tapovanji. I asked him the reason for his strange behaviour. 'Yes, yes, brahmacharin,' he would say,

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These reminiscences of the revered head of the Markandeya Ashrama, Omkareshwar, have been made available to us by his assistant, Swami Pranavanandaji, and have been translated from Hindi.

'*jogi banna kathin hai*, becoming a yogi is difficult. If I give something to someone today and then am unable to give the person anything when he visits me the next day, then that would disturb both our minds. So, such *sankalpas* (mental resolves) should not be nurtured by sadhus. *Sankalpa* is bondage.'

If you happened to visit Avadhutaji of Om Ashrama he would start reciting the Upanishads expounding the doctrine of *ajataavada* (non-Creation)—*Tejobindu*, *Mahopanishad*, and the like—and explaining their meaning. You would feel tired and leave, but he would not stop recitation of the Shruti! I once asked jokingly, 'How did this Brahman turn into a mosquito?' 'What foolishness!' he retorted. 'Why then do we see this world?' I continued (Avadhutaji did not believe in the doctrine of *maya*). 'Oh, that's the glow of Brahman; *laplapahat hai*, that's its sparkle!' he replied.

Our Maharajji (Swami Vishnudevanandaji) would not touch money, but if someone offered money for the ashrama, he would not refuse. He never felt that one swami was close and another belonged to an outside order, or any such thing. He was also very generous. If someone came to him and requested monetary help he would give from whatever was available at the ashrama. Other sadhus would protest, saying that these people had made a habit of coming and troubling the sadhus, but Maharaj would not lend ear to these criticisms. A *vidyarthi* (student brahmacharin) once came to stay at the ashrama. He used to collect the little money that people used to offer. One day he took the money and left the ashrama. The ashrama inmates were annoyed, but nobody had the courage to tell anything to Maharaj. It so happened that the

brahmacharin returned after around four months and started staying at the ashrama again. This time Biharilalji, who used to serve at the ashrama, mustered courage and spoke to Maharaj: 'Maharaj, you do not keep watch over practical matters. This brahmacharin had walked away with the ashrama money, and now he is again staying at the ashrama.' Maharaj replied, 'See Biharilal, if your son took a hundred rupees from your pocket, what would you do? Would you drive him out of the house? Hand him over to the police? Stop feeding him?' Biharilal was silent. Maharaj continued, 'You scold me for behaving in exactly the same way as you do! The only difference is that in your eyes you have only one son; to me, everyone is my son.' 'Look here Biharilal,' he added, 'If *akasha* (space) were to get annoyed with someone, where would it throw that person?'

I used to go to Maharajji to seek some clarifications on the Gita. Maharajji told his attendant, Swami Dharmanandaji, 'He should study Sanskrit grammar.' I had studied Sanskrit in my BA course, but hadn't undertaken a formal study of Panini's *Siddhanta Kaumudi*. I told Dharmanandaji that I would study grammar if Maharajji agreed to teach me. When Maharajji heard about this, he said, 'If I am to teach him, then he would have to promise that he won't leave before completing the text.' I promised. He said, 'This is Uttarakhand, so we shall start with the *uttar-ardha* (the latter half) of the text.' He was teaching the *Siddhanta Kaumudi* after a gap of twenty years. He would take classes for two to two and a half hours at a stretch, explaining the sutras in great detail. He would make us recite the full declension of thirty to forty verbal roots at a stretch. And this he did for all the verbal roots! I haven't seen anyone work so hard for a *vidyarthi* (student). His knowledge was thorough. Even then he would put in hard work. And his ability to explain the subject to any and every student was evidence of his extraordinary genius. His grace on me was unbounded. I hardly put in much work. But it was through his grace that I mastered the subject. I feel sorry to say that the effort that he put into teaching the subject was

much more than what I put into learning it.

I was very close to Maharajji. The remarkable fact about him was that despite remaining close to him, I never heard him criticize anyone. With others you could hear some criticism, not with him. He had remarkable gravity.

The memory of these sadhus is a source of strength to me. But I say, you too are seeing mahatmas, why can't you recognize them?

### 'Jagat tin kal me hai hi nahi'

There was a very old monk in Uttarkashi who, though not much educated, was a great lover of *Yoga-vasishtha Ramayana*. We used to get our *bhiksha* (alms) from the different *kshetras* (almshouses). Two of the rotis that he would get he would crush and give to birds. The remaining rotis and dal he would mix and put on a low fire and then settle down with his *Yoga-vasishtha*. When it was time to eat, the birds would gather all round him. Some would sit on his head, some here and some there, each expecting a share of the food. He had a stick with him to chase the birds away. But the birds had learnt that he only threatened them and that he could not possibly hurt them.

Once the sadhu fell ill and was unable to pass urine. I called a doctor to come and examine him. The sadhu was lying on an open platform. The doctor examined him, turned round, looked at me, and asked: 'Why isn't this old man screaming?' 'What do you mean,' I retorted, 'he is a sadhu, why should he scream?' 'He has three litres of urine accumulated in his bladder,' the doctor said, 'he is surely in great pain. So why is he not screaming?' I said, 'He is a mahatma, a great soul.' By this time many people had gathered there. Avadhutaji was also passing by after his bath in the Ganga. He came over and addressed the sick sadhu: 'Vir Giri, what does Vasishthaji say?' 'Vasishthaji says,' Vir Giriji replied 'O Ram, *jagat tin kal me hai hi nahi*, the world has no [real] existence in all the three *kalas* (past, present, and future).' What great devotion to scriptural truth!

My guru's guru had encountered a problem related to pranayama and used to suffer intermittent



bouts of excruciating colic. The attacks, each lasting for around two hours, would be so painful that he would be drenched in sweat. He wouldn't complain, but onlookers would feel greatly disturbed. A sadhu said to him, 'Swamiji, when you have this colic, even we are pained to see you in that condition. What is your experience like?' 'Well, let me give you an example to explain my feelings,' the sadhu said. 'There was a farmer. To protect his crop from animals, he got a *machan* (platform) built on a tree near the field and had an old woman sit atop making noise with a tambourine—that would scare away stray animals and birds. One day a camel entered the field. When the woman started making loud noise, the camel spoke out, "Old woman, why are you tiring yourself unnecessarily? Huge drums have been beaten atop my back. If those could not scare me, how is your tambourine going to frighten me?" So, Mahatma, when that tambourine starts playing, I see that on my real Self, Creation, Sustenance, and Dissolution have been played out on innumerable occasions. If destruction could not scare me, what can this tambourine do?'

A sadhu in Rishikesh happened to break the earthen pot that was virtually his sole possession. He requested Sri Jaydayal Goenka for another pot. Unfortunately, Goenkaji forgot about the request for the next four days. When on the fifth day he remembered it and went to the sadhu to tell him about it, the sadhu replied, 'I don't need it now. If I could manage without it for four days, then I should be able to go without the pot in future too.'

Then there was another sadhu who would grow pumpkins and serve cows. These pumpkins he would offer to Shiva. A sadhu once said to him, 'Mahatma, you have grown old, give up this *karma-kanda* (work) now.' But I have given my body over to Mahadeva many years ago, twelve years ago to be precise,' said the old sadhu. 'I don't own this body now, it is given to Mahadeva.' He fell ill the next day and requested the other sadhu to come over to him. When he arrived the old sadhu said, 'Maharaj, it appears that this body's work is now over, that's what Mahadeva wishes. Please read the Gita out to me.'

The other sadhu started reciting the Gita. When he came to the verse *Om ityekaksharam brahma* (He who departs by leaving the body while uttering the single syllable, Om, which is Brahman, and thinking of Me, he attains the supreme Goal), the old sadhu gave up his body! So it is very difficult to understand what a sadhu is doing. The sadhu's activities appeared outwardly to be like any other work—mere *karma-kanda*—but he himself was fully convinced that his body had been given over to Mahadeva, that the body was not his. In the world you have to make a show of your beliefs and convictions, otherwise others don't get to know about them—for human beings cannot be all-knowing. But God, Mahadeva, guru, is *sarvajna* (all-knowing). He doesn't require external show. For him, honesty and inner conviction (*bhava*) are more important.

Once I happened to meet a Bhil by the Narmada. There was something remarkable about his appearance—a remarkably bright, joyous, and sattvic appearance. And when he started talking to me he said such [spiritual] things that I was astounded. 'Where did you learn all these things?' I asked. 'Maharaj,' he said, 'A *sant* told me that thirty-three crore gods reside in the person of the cow. So if you manage to please the cow then the thirty-three crore gods become pleased with you. And if that comes to pass, then all your problems will be solved. This appealed to me. I told my family that I would live in the jungle and undertake *go-seva* (service to cows), and requested them to send me one meal every day. So I retired into the forest with a few cows. I took a vow not to take milk, curd, or ghee. I used to keep awake at night. I would remove the dung as soon as it was dropped. My whole mind would be occupied in the thought of making the cows happy. Twelve years passed this way. It was through their grace that I became what I am.'

In the Upanishads we get the story of Satyakama serving the cows. And then the bull talked to him and many other animals instructed him. So sincerity of purpose, devotion (*tanmayata*), and alacrity (*tatparata*) are needed. Then you could get instruction from anybody.





# Mother Would Eat Last

Swami Vimokshananda

IT was during Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's 150th birth anniversary celebrations. The Ranchi Sanatorium is surrounded by villages inhabited mostly by people of the Oraon and Munda tribes. We had a meeting with the villagers, and what they told us frankly surprised us. They said that all the six villages would take part in a big procession, starting in the morning, and would reach the ashrama campus by 11 a.m. Each village would have a *jhanki* or tableau specially made for the occasion.

On the tithi-puja day, the procession started from Tupudana, and reached the ashrama after a journey of 1 km. One of the *jhankis*, from the village Dungri, which had a little girl fully draped in a white sari like the Holy Mother with her long hair flowing over her shoulder, evoked lot of interest. She was seated on a *thelagadi*, a push-cart, and behind her there was a picture of Belur Math, drawn on a sheet of cardboard.

The girl was known to us as Arati Kachhap, studying in class five. I asked her to sit by my side on the lawn in front of our temple, and she came down from the push-cart. Several devotees were also sitting there as the temple was full inside.

I asked Arati at what time she had left her home. She said, 'By seven in the morning the didis (the elder girls of the village who were supervising the arrangements) came and dressed me up like Ma Sarada, and asked me to sit on the cart.' Then I asked her, 'Arati, did you eat anything before leaving your home?'

She replied that she had had nothing. Sensing that for a long time this little girl had been sitting on the cart without having had even a snack, I immediately asked one elder girl to bring prasad from



Village girls with tableaus for Holy Mother

the temple. When I gave her the prasad, she held it in her little hands but did not eat it. Surprised, I said, 'Arati, take it! Oh! You have not had anything since early morning. Have it now!'

To my surprise, Arati refused to eat. When I asked her why she didn't want to eat, her reply surprised me all the more. She said that her mother had instructed her not to eat. I was stunned, as I knew her mother well. She was a poor tribal woman eking out a living and supporting three children by preparing and selling *hadia* (home-made rice beer) in the bazaar. Her husband was of no use to the family. I asked Arati how it was that her mother did not approve of her eating prasad. Arati replied, after some hesitation and after my repeated prodding, 'My mother told me, "Look Arati! Today you are dressed up like Holy Mother. You should not take any food at the ashrama until all the Dungri village people are fed—because Holy Mother would always eat last, after feeding all the devotees."''

Tears came to my eyes. Arati's mother, an unlettered villager who brewed and sold *hadia*—just imagine what culture she exhibited! She had imbibed one of the core qualities of the Holy Mother, and was trying to fashion her daughter's life with what she understood! If people would follow even a fraction of the Holy Mother's teachings, how good our society would be. May Holy Mother inspire everyone!



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# Ministering to Tribals

## A Monk

THE Dumbur Hydel Project at Tirthamukh in Tripura is set in very picturesque surroundings, nested between hills in a dense forest about 110 km from Agartala. This dam on the Gomati river—on the banks of which is the famous Tripurasundari temple, which became especially well-known through Rabindranath Tagore's drama *Visarjan*—has led to the formation of a large reservoir extending upstream for miles. The lake is host to many species of birds, both local and migratory. However, the tourist potential of this region has not been realized, as this area is also home to various tribal insurgent groups who not only exercise significant territorial control but are also hostile towards outsiders—including security personnel—who intrude into this territory. The project personnel function under heavy cover of security provided by the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force).

In 1991, three monks of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar, decided to visit the project. The state chief secretary not only agreed to the request but also agreed to arrange for their journey. On the appointed day the monks drove to Jatanbari, where they were to stay for the night at the bungalow of the state electricity board.

The state chief executive engineer who met the monks at the bungalow that evening informed them that they would drive twenty-five kilometres into the forest the next day, and then proceed on launches up the Gomati river. Three launches had been commissioned for the journey, two of which were to be used by CRPF personnel as a security cover for the monks. The monks did not approve of the plan to take security personnel along, as this was only a private visit. The chief engineer

pointed out that security cover was essential and that none of the other officials who were to accompany the monks would agree to go without this cover; but the swamis were insistent. Finally, two officers who had received initiation from Swami Vireswarananda agreed to accompany the monks. The chief engineer retired for the night, telling the monks that they would think the matter over in the morning. Each of the three monks had a room to himself. One of them recounts the events that followed.

### A Monk Relates an Adventure

It was about 12.30 at night when I was woken up by a sharp knock at the door. No sooner had I got up and opened the door than a middle-aged tribal man sneaked in and shut the door behind him. He bowed to me, touched my feet, and said, 'Maharaj, will you go to see Dumbur?' 'Yes, we shall be going tomorrow,' I replied. 'Don't take the police. Come on your own. I shall be there. I am a disciple of Swami Nirvanananda.' 'Alright,' I affirmed, and he opened the door and disappeared into the darkness.

Next day, we drove up to the launch station. The station is jointly controlled by the Fisheries Department and the Electricity Board. There were many fishing boats, a government trawler, and also the launch on which we were to go at the jetty. Just as we were to board the launch, a young tribal boy jumped on to the deck, ran up to the front, and sat atop the bow, with his legs hanging down. The launch officials raised their voices: 'Who is that boy? Why did he get on?' 'Hey, who are you?' In the meantime I had been looking around for the man who had come to me the previous night, and I caught sight of him standing on a small hillock

nearby. He gestured to me that the boy was to go with us. I immediately told the serangs that the boy was known to us and he would be coming along. Nobody asked any further questions, the anchor was raised, and the launch started cruising upstream.

Our trip lasted the whole day, and the boy on the bow stayed put throughout without speaking a word to anyone. In the afternoon we halted for lunch on a small island. The launch officials offered the boy some food, but he refused. Then I went up to him and offered him a plate. This time he accepted, but refused to be drawn into any conversation. The only time he opened his mouth was when we were passing through deep forest, when he would sound a peculiar high-pitched call.

The launch returned to the jetty just before dusk. As soon as it reached the bank the boy jumped off and disappeared in a trice.

As we drove back towards Jatanbari, the officers said, 'Maharaj, you were the guests of those very persons whom the security persons were supposed to ward off. So obviously you had little to fear. The boy's "calls" were signals that guests were around.'

After returning to Jatanbari, I asked one of the officers if there wasn't any security cover for the bungalow. 'What do you mean, Maharaj?' the officer replied, 'The security is so tight that even a fly cannot pass undetected.' 'A fly may not,' I continued, 'but a full-grown tribal man had visited me last night!' And it was only then that I told everybody the happenings of the previous night.

On return to the ashrama, the monk in charge confirmed the news about the spiritual ministrations of Swami Nirvanananda, while he was vice president of the Ramakrishna Order, amidst the tribals in the deep forests of Tripura—in the villages that were later drowned in the reservoir of the Dumbur project.

PB



## Flowing with the Current

**B**illoom had spent a whole day digging channels for the water to reach the plants in his field. That morning he had spent three hours drawing water and pouring it out into the source tank for the channels. Now when he came to see if the water had reached all the plants, he realized that his channel had breached even before reaching the field, and that all the water he had drawn with so much effort had gone into a pit.

The field had tricked him. Billoom burst out laughing. The whole of his life had been a game with the field, he thought. Not just with his field, with the whole of nature. Not just with nature either, but with the divine child Krishna. Most of the time Krishna was kind and generous, but every once in a while he played a practical joke on him. Billoom not only grew to accept Krishna's sense of humour, but also took it in his stride and even celebrated by joining in his laughter.

He decided that the plants could wait one more day

for the water. He wanted to return to the village and see again the swamiji whom he had seen walking into the village that morning. His eyes had suggested to Billoom the vastness of the sky.

Billoom found him sitting under the big tree. There were many people around him. Some were asking him questions and some sat listening. Billoom heard the words, but their meaning escaped him. Nor was he interested. The swamiji's demeanour fascinated him. The poise, the calm, the peace that he exuded entranced him. He just stood at a distance letting it all soak in, enjoying the delight of it.

It grew dark and the people left one by one. At last he was alone with the swamiji. Billoom approached him slowly. The swamiji looked up and asked if he had a question too.

'No, Swamiji,' Billoom replied, 'It is late and you must be hungry. Would you mind sharing my dinner with me?'

—Prof. K Viswanath, Hyderabad

# The Transfiguration

Swami Satyamayananda

‘NO! How many times do you need to be told so?’ The words were sharp and clearly cut into her scarred soul. The swami in charge of admitting patients to the hospital appeared exasperated as he tossed the sheaf of smudgy medical papers towards the woman. Even the papers that missed the nervous fingers fell hushed at her feet. He had already turned to confront another miserable soul from the sea of unwashed, unfed, and uncared-for bodies pressing against his desk. They surged and receded in waves, threatening to wash him away into the sea of misery from whence they came.

It was that dreaded time of day when the swami’s workplace became a hell on earth. He often felt helpless—though doing the best he could in the face of insuperable limitations. Money was important to run the hospital so that poor people could avail themselves of its services. His superiors did not approve of him waiving fees just because people cried. Nor did they approve of him being carried away by his emotions. Right now, the word ‘humanity’ for him had become a dirty word.

The woman pleaded and even tugged at his sleeve, but the swami’s attention had long since shifted. Her pleas rose and mixed with the others, all welling up from distraught hearts and filling the room. The swami’s bald head was glistening, and the sweat trickled down his body, drenching his shirt. He would manage a smile one moment, and then frown in annoyance the next, now cocking his head to listen, and again purring words of encouragement—the range of emotions he displayed was unbelievable.

It was years before that the swami’s defence mechanisms had been erected, insulating him against the overwhelming pleas for ‘human consideration’, but the pathetic cries and miserable faces registered subconsciously, and troubled him deep within. He sometimes needed tranquilizers to sleep, and pills to normalize his blood pressure and blood sugar. How he wished to give up all this and go to the mountains and meditate. Well, he was free to do that; and yet he could not and would not do it. Love for Sri Ramakrishna was what bound him—and he couldn’t give *that* up. Sri Ramakrishna, who looked down from his picture on the wall, was making him miserable; but the swami’s insight, developed through spiritual practices, reminded him of his mission and the spiritual fulfilment that awaited him. The faces of a hundred ghosts tugging day and night at his peace of mind could not pull him off his moorings. Yet he was beset with feelings of inadequacy.

The woman looked about wildly for non-existent support. She had no time to take note of the swami’s exasperation. The flimsy black veil—inappropriate at this time and place—had been flung back in a futile bid to reveal her scarred life. The gentility of her gaunt countenance could not conceal the shadows of a thousand miseries. The swami hurled another ‘No’ at another face like hers, and then said softly, ‘Mother, please bring even a little money first, and then I’ll admit your child ...’

The little woman bent awkwardly and with trembling fingers picked up the medical papers lying near her feet. Feeling too drained to say another word, she turned and melted away amidst the crush of bodies as tired as her own. This was the umpteenth time she had gone through this exercise of seeking a waiver on the charges for medicines

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Swami Satyamayanandaji is a monastic member of the Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata.



and lab tests that the doctors dutifully prescribed. Not that the swami hadn't helped—but the surgeon now wanted to operate on her child, and that needed a lot of money. She had either pawned or sold almost everything she had at home. Her modest house was now as bare as her soul. As she pushed through the last cordon of limbs, her spine suddenly straightened and her eyes blazed with resolution. With purposeful steps she rushed out of the office, letting the burka catch up with her determination.



Hope

ARGHYANEEL BHOWMIK, CLASS 7, AGARTALA

so nice and kind.' Her voice was strong now, and her malnourished frame seemed to have grown; it now seemed to tower over the desk. 'This is what I have collected.'

Her child's operation would cost at least ten thousand rupees. The woman continued, 'Baba, don't worry if the amount is not much. I will go out and beg every day till the whole amount is paid. I promise you ... you will have no difficulty ... I will not give up.' The pathetic figure he had seen earlier now seemed

totally transformed. Was it optimism? Was it faith? Whatever it was, there was a powerful will here and it was growing. What happened to *his* will and dedication, he mused, which he had used to renounce the world for God's sake, for serving Him in suffering humanity? Was his faith in Swami Vivekananda—who had inspired him as a youth and had guided him all through—dissipated? A whole host of emotions suddenly welled up from within.

The swami's profound silence reined in her irrepressible confidence. There was something growing in him. The noise of the crowds had fallen away. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he said, 'You don't have to go out begging. I'll see that your daughter gets the operation. See me tomorrow morning.' The swami's voice was now differently resolute and seemed to come from a great distance as he made a mental note to do some additional begging of some generous people. The stunned woman stared at the swami, who now sat relaxed and straight, a fresh light lighting up his eyes. She seemed to understand. Two souls manifesting power, overcoming their limitations, remained mute, astounded at their transformation. The swami broke the silence. 'Go, Mother! You are hungry; take this money with you and get something to eat.'



The swami lifted his eyes to look at her troubled, and yet determined face. The elated woman continued unfazed, 'After I left the hospital I went out and begged from people on the streets, from cars, shops, and houses. I pleaded with people to save my child. Many people responded, many didn't. People are

# *Spirituality in Everyday Life*

**Monika Mellem**

**W**HAT does it mean to act in a spiritual manner? Certainly in opening a door or giving up a seat on the bus for another person, we are expressing characteristics of spirituality. Vedanta teaches us that it is spiritual to realize divinity in all things. But is this the same as the everyday acts that we consider to be spiritual? By opening a door for someone, are we seeing that person as divine or just doing something nice? Is it possible to create a spiritual connection with another human being through simple everyday acts, or is it necessary to make grand selfless gestures for it? Pondering over these questions, I recall the following anecdotes, which have left impressions on my mind. While they reflect my personal thoughts on spirituality in everyday life, I hope that they also give the reader a chance to think about his or her own spiritual experiences.

Making a connection with another human being—be it physical, mental, or spiritual—can be very stirring. Though we may forget it, it takes but little to have a positive effect on another person. Once, after a long intercontinental flight, while riding an escalator I was absent-mindedly staring out the window. My eyes settled on a man operating some machinery next to a plane. When he realized that I was watching him, he gave me a friendly wave. Normally I would have been embarrassed that I had been caught staring at someone, but unexpectedly I found myself smiling and waving back. We needed no words to communicate, and with a simple, unexpected wave he put me in a happy mood for many hours. It was uplifting to know how easy it is to

make a genuine connection with another human being, even in the most impersonal of places.

One of the most touching gestures I have felt was during a time when I was most lonely. While I was living in St Petersburg, Russia, I would go about once a week to the local market. I would frequently visit a certain man who sold spices, nuts, and dried fruit. He was an older gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair and a radiant smile spiced with a few gold teeth. I went exclusively to him for my spices, because I liked his smile so much and he always helped me practise my Russian. Once I bought a few dollars worth of pistachios, and he secretly slipped a small packet of dried banana slices into my shopping bag too. Not being too fond of bananas, I wasn't very excited to find them when I got home. But as I ate them I found them delicious! When I tried to replicate the experience by buying some more dried banana the following week, I found that I had not become a banana lover overnight. Then I realized that I enjoyed them so much the first time because they were a symbol of the shopkeeper's kindness and warmth. His gesture had filled me with something that bananas alone could not give.

This kindness seems most touching when one is a stranger in far away lands. I have a friend, however, who, when a stranger abroad, is as kind and giving as any native. She—Sophie—is an avid and excellent traveller. She has lived in several countries and has always kept her friends and family up-to-date on her global adventures through her blogs on the Internet. She makes friends easily because she is a loving, generous, and interesting woman. Even if she is staying only one night in a hostel, she will open herself up to those around her. She shares her sandwiches and stories with strangers whom she

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may never see again. Once she invited me to visit her, while she was living in a small town in northern Italy. And that is how I came to witness a touching display of her generosity.

Australia Day is held at the end of January. Being part Australian, Sophie decided to celebrate it in this small town nestled among the snow-capped Dolomite Mountains. In three months, she had already made many friends in the town, most of whom were Italian students from the nearby university. As the party was starting, some dark-haired young men arrived. They entered timidly, but Sophie greeted them warmly and made sure they were at ease. She told me that they were Moroccan immigrants who were break-dancing in the town square when she met them. They had recently immigrated to Italy and were working at menial jobs around the town. Sadly, they experienced much racism from the local townspeople. They were marginalized from much of the community and rarely got to experience social gatherings with people of their own age. Sophie had created a warm and welcoming place filled with like-minded people, and soon the Moroccans began feeling more at home. They socialized with everyone, showed us some of their acrobatic break-dancing moves (which often involve balancing one's suspended body on one hand!), and for one day enjoyed a more normal evening among their peers. Although this was a simple act of inviting some people to a party, it was easy to see how much it meant to the Moroccan

immigrants. By throwing a party on Australia Day in Italy, my American friend was not only welcoming—as if a generous native—the Moroccans and Italians, but was also displaying the way she makes easy and warm connections with many people regardless of their backgrounds and cultures. Sophie is able to look beyond a person's physical characteristics and see the essence of his or her character.

It is easiest to see how we express spirituality when we help others without self-interest. There are also cases where a good

act does not directly help another person but still seems spiritual in nature. These acts primarily strengthen the character of the person performing them and can often indirectly help others grow spiritually.

Following is a very simple but striking example. I was once sitting across the desk from a prominent swami at Belur Math. His office was sparsely furnished but had an air of warmth. My mother and I had been visiting for tea. He was telling us many interesting things, and at one point needed to write down a name for us to look up. He took the large pad of paper next to him and tore off only the amount of paper needed to write the name, a piece a quarter of the size of a full sheet. To one who has grown up with copious amounts of paper and has given little regard to the use of it, this was a striking act of conservation. But conservation doesn't just benefit the environment, it also is an expression of honesty and awareness of what is genuinely needed. Whether a ballet dancer is using energy efficiently, so that she can perform for hours, or a farmer is saving cow dung for fertilizer, mindful activity is an expression of spirituality.

We all know certain people who are consistently positive, though such people are rare. Both my sister and I had Mr Degener as our eighth grade literature teacher. He was always happy and upbeat and very passionate about reading and teaching. His enthusiasm was contagious, his smile infectious. It didn't appear that he was doing this for his students—



indeed it wasn't the kind of enthusiasm that one could create for another's sake. It seemed to come from a sincere love for life. My sister, Megan, recalls a story about Mr Degener that makes us laugh to this day. Megan was standing, somewhat in awe of his lending library, in his classroom. When he came up to her, she asked him, 'Mr Degener, how can you have read so many books?' He responded that when he wakes up in the morning, he is so eager to start reading that he puts in only one contact lens. That way he can start reading practically the minute he wakes up. He usually forgets to put the other lens in and ends up walking around all day with only one contact lens! Undoubtedly, this teacher loved being around children and loved teaching. But I remember him today because he was a simple, positive man openly passionate about literature. I don't think that his cheerfulness came from a desire to inspire good feelings in others, but that was one of the main effects it had.

We often think that doing what is right for others and making sacrifices to take care of them are spiritual acts. Doing what is right for oneself, however, can also be a spiritual act. A friend that I recently got to know had a brain tumour before I met her. As a lawyer, Amy was used to working very long hours. But as her health declined, she started having to take time off. Eventually she was not working at all and had to undergo surgery to remove the tumour. She was very weak for many months, and took several years to recover fully. During this time she was learning her new limits and trying to expand them, to restore them to what they were before the surgery. But ultimately she decided to switch careers so that she could work within her new limitations rather than against them. She chose to teach English, which she was no less passionate about. Her courage was reflected not only in battling the tumour but in learning her new limits and deciding to take care of her health. Before we can help others, we must make sure our bodies and minds are strong, and Amy is an excellent example of this point.

It has only been in recollecting some of these

stories that I have realized how simple most spiritual acts are. They do not require a great deal of effort, can be done quietly and out of the spotlight, can involve familiar people or strangers, and can be planned or unplanned. These simple acts are spiritually beneficial not only to others but also to ourselves. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, such acts help us see each other in a different light. In essence, when we let down our guard, put aside our ego, it is then that we are able to forge spiritual connections with our brothers and sisters of the world.

PB



*Orthodox churches in Russia,  
below and opposite page*





# Mortal Eyes in Search of Immortal Vision

Dr Prema Padmanabhan

WHEN I reflect on my life's journey hitherto, I cannot help feeling that a compelling Power has shepherd me through the course it has taken. How else could a nurtured interest in astrophysics find itself steered towards ophthalmology? Whither the boundless universe I wanted to explore, and where the thumb-sized socket I was confining myself to for the rest of my life? Little did I realize the richness of the world I was entering.

## Kashi-kshetram shariram

The life sciences held a fascination for me and filled me with reverence for the Creator and all that he had created. While I was sure that Acharya Shankara was referring to our attachment to the gross body when he said '*Sthulam nindyamidam vapuh*'; this gross body is an object of derision', I felt that the *sthula sharira*, gross body, itself deserved more respect. The *annamayakosha*, or 'sheath derived from food', was not just a cloak designed to be discarded; it was not just a clod of clay—it was a work of art, its immaculate design bearing the stamp of the Artist, each cell a manifest miracle.

In fact, it was the study of the human body that sowed the seed of faith in me. The travails that the body and mind are subject to have taught me the finer lessons of life. The study of the human body, then, became a pilgrimage, and my profession as a doctor, a divine opportunity.

The three decades of my service have exposed me to the gamut of human emotions. I have seen the yoke of suffering crush families. I have seen an unlettered woman stand tall with the strength of

surrender. I have suffered the anguish of a million prayers going unanswered. I have felt the mystic touch of the indwelling One. The reality of pain, the tyranny of darkness, the wound of despair may seem like heaven's retribution for forgotten follies. Many a time I have felt that by invoking the law of karma to explain human misery, we are abdicating our responsibility towards the 'victims'. But there are flowers too in the garden of life—the power of kindness, the tender touch of love, the shower of divine grace. If only I could be the gentle breeze that spread the fragrance of these flowers all around me, I would find meaning in my existence.

## 'Naham deham'—easier said than done!

An ochre-robed teacher, believed to have a sizeable following, walked into our hospital one day. He described the problems with his vision, constantly referring to himself in the third person: 'These eyes don't see well. He finds it difficult to move around,' he said, referring to himself. What an evolved soul, I thought, admiring the complete absence of 'I' or 'mine' in his language. After a thorough examination, I had to tell him that nothing could be done to restore vision. In no more than a few seconds, I saw human emotion overwhelm his disciplined resolve of renunciation. 'How can I live without my eyes? Is there any other place in the world which can offer a cure? I would rather die than be blind,' he sobbed in obvious anguish. A familiar human response, but not one that I expected from someone who, until recently, spoke of 'these eyes'. I realized how difficult it really is to dissociate oneself from the body. An admirable habit, perhaps, in word, a more difficult discipline of the mind, but what sadhana it would take to truly evolve to that state!

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**'Her clasp shall turn to ecstasy our pain'**

Nothing has been as depressing and unsettling as watching the plight of infants with birth defects. How pitiless could the Creator be to levy taxes from a defenceless newborn, doomed to fulfil a will not its own! And if they are born with underdeveloped brains, as they often are, is it an act of mercy so that they don't feel cheated? The images of some of these infants, barely recognizable as human, have often haunted me. But yet, the mother sees it so differently. She cradles her babe in her arms, determined to protect it as it were, with the armour of her love. If the plight of the child is the decree pronounced by the law of karmic justice, it seems savage to me. If the unconditional love of the mother is a human response, it seems divine.

**The One that is Both—The Tao**

How rare it is to come across someone who bears his cross with joy. Sometimes fate strikes a hammer-blow with malignant force, as it did on a lovely couple whom I have had the good fortune of knowing. Accomplished and talented artists both, they had reached the zenith of their professional lives when tragedy struck a double blow—a traffic accident that left her paralyzed and an incurable eye disease that reduced his vision to a tubular field. With no hope of cure for either, their lives seemed to have come to a standstill. But in a sense they complemented each other even more thereafter, their interdependence becoming their strength, not their weakness. 'She has my eyes,' he would say. 'He has my limbs' would be her rejoinder, capturing the *ardhanari* (half female) concept in their total oneness. I was conscious of my dual responsibility when I operated on her eyes. 'Remember, doctor,' she said just before I commenced surgery, 'your surgery will have to restore vision for

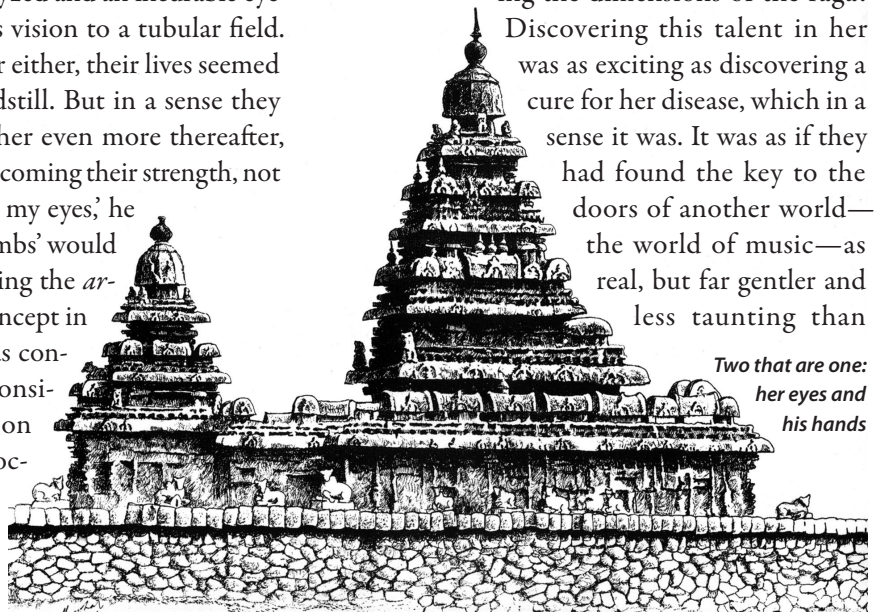
both of us!'

Their house is a home for many—young boys and girls whose education they support, budding artists whose progress they supervise, people from all walks of life besieged by personal problems who seek their counsel, and many others who have just grown addicted to their warmth. He doesn't see the face he is talking to, but recognizes the Lord everywhere. She cannot lift so much as a finger, but embraces all humanity. No longer able to draw and paint, they have made of their lives a work of art—filling the canvas of each day with rich colours of love, laughter, and joy.

**Santushto yena kenachit**

Contentment lies in the heart, not in circumstances. I learnt this big lesson from a small girl. A developmental defect in her eyes robbed her of all the normal joys of childhood. She never played hide-and-seek with her friends; indeed the colourful world was playing hide-and-seek with her. She never learnt to read or write; what use did she have for either? She became shy, quiet, and withdrawn. One day her mother heard her humming a song to herself, when she thought she was alone. What a sweet voice and how impressively she was exploring the dimensions of the raga!

Discovering this talent in her was as exciting as discovering a cure for her disease, which in a sense it was. It was as if they had found the key to the doors of another world—the world of music—as real, but far gentler and less taunting than




Two that are one:  
her eyes and  
his hands

this one. And the sun shone on her—a winning combination of resourceful parents, a committed teacher, and her own diligence soon saw her mature into a musician in full bloom. She found the world she could relate to, and felt at home in its landscape. No wonder her serene face with a pleasant smile was so strikingly refreshing when I first saw her. Her parents had brought her to us with the fond hope that modern medicine could offer a remedy. Examining her made me feel I was handling a flower, delicate and fragrant. I felt remorseful, as I always do in such situations, about having to acknowledge the limitations of ‘modern medicine’. I feared she would wilt from the harshness of the ‘verdict’, and asked rather awkwardly if I could speak to either parent alone, while the other could wait with the girl in the next room. She sensed my discomfort, even if she did not see the pain on my face, and consoled me with gentle strength: ‘Don’t worry, doctor. I already know I have to live like this. This visit was to satisfy my parents. I am so happy in my world of music. I have no other attractions or distractions. I am so grateful for this.’ She had discovered what she was blessed with and had forgotten what she was deprived of. She discovered herself and more importantly, she discovered contentment within herself. So who was handicapped—she or I? As I led them to the door, her mother tearfully asked me if anything, just anything could be done to make her daughter see just a little better. And I respectfully said, ‘I am sorry I cannot perform a miracle. But your daughter has.’

## Ihaikastham jagatkritsnam

### pashyadya sacharacharam

Every single time I peer through an operating microscope, it is as if I were preparing for a cosmic journey. As dancers beg forgiveness from Mother Earth for treading on her, I feel humbled by the sheer beauty of the ground I would be trespassing and seek pardon: ‘*Hasta-sparsha kshamasva me; forgive the touch of my hand*’. Entering the sanctum of the eye through the surgical microscope has always made me feel as though I was bursting into a universe of Light and being embraced by the harmony of finite Prakriti and the infinite Purusha. As my mortal eyes look down into other eyes through the oculars, I feel the Supreme gazing back at me—a self-validating experience that leaves no room for thought or questions. I sense the presence of that ‘*chakshushaschakshu; eye of the eye*’ opening the windows of my own inner sight. So who is watching whom? I sense the immanence of the universal Being. Is this what the Lord meant when he said, ‘*Yo mam pashyati sarvatra, sarvam cha mayi pashyati; who sees Me in all things, and sees all things in Me*’? All the while, of course, my mind remains focused on the surgical task at hand, or else I would bring ignominy to myself and my profession!—but there too with a prayer that my hands be guided towards Perfection. The entire experience is ‘yogic’. I can feel the little ‘I’ dissolve into the vast Infinity—exactly as I do when I gaze at the star-studded sky. Macrocosm or microcosm, ‘only the fringe of the wide surge we see’. And if this itself is so glorious, how would the Ocean be! 

**O**ur vision is but limited. There are many beings living beyond our ken. Microscopes and telescopes increase the power of our vision; there is another and far superior method to make our vision limitless, and that is disentangling it from its seats, the eyes, which are limited by their very nature. The eyes only circumscribe our vision, and although they may be helped by microscopes and telescopes, their limitations never leave them. If, by means of introspection, you can

gradually separate the powers of your vision from its limited seats, the eyes, the optic nerves, and the centre in the brain, you will make that power infinite, and see *yakshas, vidyadharas, siddhas, charanas, kinnaras*, and many gods and demigods. The infinite caught in the network of the nerves appears to be finite. By means of mental concentration you can disentangle your senses, your mind, and your self from it.

—Swami Ramakrishnananda

# Some 'Uncommon' Common People

Dr Imtiaz Ahmad

INTELLECTUALS and scholars have explained and understood spiritualism and spirituality in various ways. To some, spiritualism is the opposite of materialism; to others it represents a higher intellect and perception; still others find in it a means of coming closer to the Almighty and attaining salvation. Some people identify it with noble character, modesty, and rejection of worldly concerns; others consider an effort to bring a smile on someone's face, to add a feeling of happiness to the life of others as spirituality. Thus, spiritualism and spirituality have many dimensions and find expression in different forms, often in unexpected and uncommon ways. Although the popular perception about spiritualism is based essentially on the concept of a holy man with a profound knowledge of the scriptures and a sense of detachment from the world, this is not always the case. Often, very common and ordinary people, whom we tend to ignore in our day-to-day life, have a different concept altogether of spiritual life. They do not indulge in theoretical debates and speculations, but practise in their day-to-day life those values which elevate a human being from a lowly mundane level to a higher and purer level of spiritual fulfilment. They offer some very noble examples of moral and spiritual conduct. I would like to share some examples of such people in the following lines.

Babban Mian was an old man. He had spent the greater part of his life as the personal attendant of a gentleman who was a professor of oriental languages in a university. He had served him loyally and had received a small salary, as was the practice in the earlier decades of the past century, and lived

in a small room in the *haveli* (mansion) of his employer. When the gentleman passed away, his son, also a professor, then living in the official quarters allotted to him, told Babban Mian that his services were not required anymore and he could take up another job somewhere else. Babban Mian went away quietly. He would come to see his former employer's son at times; but never asked him for any favour. Whenever anyone from the family asked about his welfare, Babban Mian would always say that he was doing well. Actually he was not! Some strange sentiment, somehow, made him believe that it was unethical for him to seek another job or serve another master. Though he received offers from several quarters—since he was as an honest and capable person—he did not accept any of them. Life was becoming increasingly difficult for him. He had children who supported him, but they were themselves persons of small means. Some time later, Babban Mian fell ill, and his condition deteriorated quickly. One morning, he came to his former master's house. He was seriously ill and was almost unable to walk. His sons were with him. Babban Mian asked his former employer's grandson for one favour—the last favour! He sought permission to be buried inside the family graveyard at the foot of his former employer's grave. The permission was, of course, given. In life and in death, Babban Mian's devotion to his employer was all-encompassing. He was totally unconcerned about his personal difficulties, ailments, and suffering; his only concern was loyalty and devotion to his employer till the very end.

Bhola is a poor rickshaw puller. Until some years back, he carried students of a local school in Patna from their respective homes to the school and back. After school hours he also plied his rickshaw, car-

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rying sundry passengers from one place to another. He was well-built, hard-working, and often made a good daily earning. Among the students that came to school with Bhola was a small boy, Munna, who then read in class two. Unfortunately, Munna's father died in a road accident, and Munna was unable to attend school for a few days. When he resumed coming to school, he was a totally different child. He would hardly talk and his eyes were mostly wet. Bhola, in his own way, tried to cheer him up. Munna confided in him that he might have to leave school because his father was no more. Bhola was almost in tears. He had somehow developed an affinity for the young boy. Bhola went to the school's principal with a strange proposal: that he was willing to bring Munna to school every day without charging any fare; he was also willing to submit his earnings from his school passengers towards payment of Munna's monthly tuition fee. But the child must not leave the school. Thankfully, Munna's apprehensions were born of a child's fear. His family was certainly in a position to continue his schooling, and Bhola's generous offer did not require acceptance. However, the very thought, the noble intention, that a poor rickshaw puller displayed is an experience to remember. Munna grew up to be an officer in a local bank. Bhola, now in his late middle age, feeble and at times sick, often meets Munna, but has steadily refused any help from him.

Rafo works as a waiter in a hotel at Karol Bagh in Delhi. A family stayed at the hotel for a day. They were to travel abroad and had come from Patna to catch their flight. They left for the airport in the evening. Their infant son was uncomfortable and was crying as they were boarding the taxi. In the confusion, they forgot to pick up their briefcase, which had their travel documents, cash (including the mandatory foreign-exchange that was required in those days for persons travelling abroad), and some jewellery. A little later, the man realized that the briefcase was not with them and asked the taxi driver to return to the hotel. On enquiring from the counter clerk, he was told that the

waiter, Rafo, had noticed that they had left their briefcase. He opened it, since it was not locked, and saw that it contained important papers, cash, and jewellery. He had therefore rushed to the airport, just after they had left, so that he could hand over the briefcase to them, because without those travel documents, they could not have taken the flight. The man could hardly believe what he heard. He thought that this was just an excuse and that he had lost his briefcase and its contents for good. But the counter clerk assured him that he was telling the truth. He also asked another waiter to accompany them back to the airport so that they might not have difficulty in locating Rafo. The man's joy can be imagined when he saw Rafo with the briefcase standing near the main entrance. 'Sahib, please check that all your belongings are safe!' That was all Rafo said. He politely refused the bakshish the man offered him and said that he was happy that he could hand over the briefcase to him in time and that his journey would continue without any difficulty.


Ashu was a differently-abled person. She was restricted to a wheelchair. She was born in a family of humble means, and her parents were unable to give her the comforts of life. But she never complained. She was intelligent, sensitive, and a good student. She knew that she was suffering from a terminal disease which could not be cured; but neither she, nor anyone else who loved and cared for her, knew when the end would come. She lived a full life, in her own way, and refused to be overpowered by her disability. She went to school regularly, obtained good marks in her exams, and completed schooling with a high grade. She travelled with the family both on short and long journeys. She tried to remain happy and keep others happy. In her spare time, she taught poor girls living around her to read and write.

She fell ill about a year ago. Her cardio-respiratory system had begun to fail due to advancing muscular weakness. She remained in the hospital for three months. She underwent a painful process of rapidly advancing illness and slow

and difficult treatment; but she never complained. The doctors, attendants, and nurses at the hospital called her a 'role model', a perfectly cooperative patient. She would listen to songs, or watch cricket matches on TV in the hospital room, never complaining about her pain and suffering. Her willpower was so strong that she ultimately recovered to the extent that she could return from the hospital to her home. For six months she remained at home, encouraging her parents, brother, and sister to prepare themselves for what destiny had ordained! She kept a window open to the outside world, sending e-mails and SMSs to her friends and relatives, since she was unable to speak following the tracheostomy at the hospital.

Six months later, she had to be hospitalized once again. Before leaving for the hospital, she picked up her laptop and wrote a mail to her aunt in Canada whom she dearly loved. Her message was brief and poignant, but bold and confident: 'I am leaving

for the hospital. This may be my last mail to you. Khuda Hafiz!'

She remained at the hospital for about three weeks before the end came. The family knew and she knew too, that she would not be able to return home. One of the last things she did, a few days before she passed away, was to ask her younger sister to take out some money from her (Ashu's) pocket-money and purchase presents for the birthdays of her father, mother, and brother, all of whom were born in the month of November. She wrote that if she was still around she would hand over the presents herself; otherwise the sister would do so! She passed away a day before her father's birthday, and her birthday present—a secret that she had shared with her sister alone—was given to her father after he returned from the graveyard, having buried her. She went to her true Lord; and her last act was to think of others and the happiness she could give to them. 

## 'Trust Is Our Greatest Asset'

It was 1943. The Second World War was at its peak. The population of soldiers and air force fighters had risen to such extent in Karachi in that it had deeply affected civilian life in the city. Most fruits and vegetables had disappeared from the markets and the few varieties still available were being sold at very high prices. Much of the supply of green vegetables and potatoes was being diverted from the local markets to the kitchens of the armed forces. If a vendor could at all manage to procure some potatoes, he would keep them in a place out of reach of his customers.

The Ranchhod Line area of Karachi was predominantly Gujarati. The small vegetable market there was dominated by two Muslim brothers, Gulab and Habib. No one else could compete with them. They knew most of the customers by name, would allow them to pick and choose, and would sell on credit without making any entry in their notebooks. They had full faith in their customers. During the mango season in particular, they would be surrounded by crowds of customers, to whom they would sell mangoes on credit. They would have no time to jot down the details of credit and would ac-

cept whatever was given to them by the customers. One afternoon towards the end of 1943, I was buying from Gulab whatever greens were available. I asked him to give me fresh coriander, green chillies, and ginger for two annas. He said politely, 'Master Sahib, I'm very sorry, but we cannot sell the masala at less than four annas.' I agreed to take it for four annas. As I was calculating the net amount I was to pay, a seven- or eight-year-old girl walked to the counter and said, 'Gulab, my mother has sent me to buy masala for two annas.' Without uttering a word, Gulab gave the girl much more than he had given me for four annas.

I drew his attention to the injustice. He replied: 'Sahib, you are an educated man and understand why prices have gone up. This girl's mother does not fully understand the situation and, what is more, she has sent her daughter with full trust in me. If I say no to her or even if I give her as much as I gave you, her mother would think that I have cheated the young girl. Money is not permanent. This trust is our greatest asset.'

I have not forgotten these words of Gulab even after six decades. —Dushyant Pandya, Jamnagar

# ***Spiritual Values Manifested in Life***

**G S Jayadev**

**E**INSTEIN is reported to have said, ‘Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value. The former requires mere intelligence, even corrupt intelligence, but to become a man of value takes character in the first place.’ Spiritual intensity can be gauged only from a person’s life-pattern and the values that he or she upholds. A society, too, must be gauged by the values it embodies. In essence, spirituality means manifesting the values one has absorbed from one’s parents, culture, and peers in every act of life, and in that way unfolding one’s innate divinity. Spirituality is often confused with mysticism and esoteric practices. Spiritual life is better learnt by observing and adopting a life of lived values than by reading any number of scriptures. Hence, values are seminal components of a civil society. Values are always based on truth—both objective as well as subjective. Let us recall that Sri Ramakrishna could not renounce truth at the feet of Mother Kali, though he offered other virtues, in order to go beyond all pairs of opposites.

Values have evolved out of necessity during the long period of social evolution, and have a survival value of their own in communal living. Values bring harmony in society, uphold justice, and build up cordial relationships. A society without values will sooner or later collapse, leading to chaos and destruction.

The fact that we still have a civil society shows that values prevail among the common people—people who are often marginalized and condemned as social vermin. Such people do not seek recognition for or appreciation of their values, but simply

live their lives. It is they who form the bulk of our population; therefore they are the upholders of values in society. Values are confined neither to those towering characters with name and fame nor to famous historical personages. We tend to get carried away by the persona, and fail to plumb the true depths of the individual. Decline of values in a society results in estrangement of the weaker people; the strong and unscrupulous then reign. People of might always resort to stage-managed showmanship of values. Such apparent practice of values provides them with advantages for survival and better societal acceptance.

## ***Values in Practice***

True unostentatious practice of values is always found among the naive and simple people of any society. They form the true living structure of values because they manifest them spontaneously in their actions and build harmonious relationships. ‘To live and let live’ is the motto that they live by out of necessity.

As a social worker, working amidst the orphans and destitute of Karnataka, I have been witness to such glorious examples of lived spiritual values that I feel they need to be shared with you readers. Perhaps, these examples will move you deeply and set you to think and feel. This, I am sure, will foster a better understanding of the poorer sections of our society. Let me relate three incidents that have been haunting my sense of being cultured or elite.

Once I went to a temple. As usual there was a line of beggars at the entrance. It was not a very big line though. Most of the beggars were old or disabled people. Seeing an old woman in the beginning of the line, my hand went into my pocket, to see if I could bring out some coins. I found a single rupee

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coin and dropped it into her begging bowl. I had nothing left for the next in line. As I walked further, the next person, a younger woman if my memory is correct, screamed in indignation. I regretted that I had no more coins to offer. But the first lady, who had received alms from me, said immediately without any ambiguity or conflict in her mind, 'Sir, let her also live,' and taking a fifty paisa coin from her own bowl, dropped it into the bowl of the woman next to her. The sound that emanated from the coin falling into that aluminium bowl seemed holier than the temple bells that were ringing to announce the piety of devotees—devotees who were in all probability seeking various favours from the Lord. The magnanimity of that old woman captivated me, and put me in a rapture that lingered on within me for the whole day. Her attitude of sharing and concern for others has taught me a great lesson that I can never forget.

I would like to share another incident. As a young boy, I was a scout. We were taken to a distant place where the scout camp was held. Our scout master was addressed as 'brother'. We were a group of about twenty-five boys. We fetched water, cooked our food, and participated in the routine scout activities. We always carried a first-aid box, hoping to find an injured person, so that we could use it! I carried it even after the camp for a long time, but to my disappointment, I found scant opportunity to use my box.

There is something from this camp that I remember to this date. Every day in the evening, before dinner, 'brother' would hold a review meeting about how we conducted ourselves, whether we were helpful to each other, what mistakes we committed, and so on. We would sit in a circle, and each one had to share his viewpoint. Most of us were very vociferous in pouring out a host of complaints about others. Soon it was the turn of a boy amongst us whose name I have forgotten. Perhaps that indicates he was not a conspicuous person, a mild and less assertive boy. He was not the most sought after to be assigned a responsible job. There were other 'intelligent' boys to enjoy that preroga-

tive. We were wondering what this boy would say. Unavoidably he had to open his mouth. He said in a confident voice, 'I do not know what mistakes others have committed, but I sincerely beg excuse if I have committed any mistake.' This simple statement of humility and openness came as a surprise to the 'brother' also. All of a sudden this unknown boy became very famous in the group.

Dr Prabhushankara, a close friend and senior, often narrates a very touching incident. Probably it happened in the nineteen-forties. Educational opportunity for poor or orphaned children was bleak in those days, as there were no free hostels. Many a bright child could not pursue higher education. One such orphan boy was bright in his studies and dared continue his high school studies in a town. Though there were no free hostels, there was a system of householders providing food for such students once in a week. The boy had to find seven such families so that he could manage to get food for the entire week. He found six families, but unfortunately could find no one to feed him on the seventh day. Probably it was Sunday. Having come to know his plight, a poor primary school teacher offered to feed him on Sundays. He said, 'After all, I have several children of my own, and feeding you will not make any difference to my poverty.'


This solved the orphan boy's problem, and he used to sit with the children of the schoolmaster and have his meal. The mother of the household was a very unusual lady. She would serve the food with great affection and love. But there was a difference that the orphan boy did not fail to notice. Her own children were served left-over food, while she served him a fresh hot meal. This procedure was repeated every Sunday. Intrigued and embarrassed by this unusual practice, the orphan boy asked the mother why she always fed her children with left-overs while he was given a hot meal. Her answer was very simple: 'My child, if my own children fall ill because of leftover food, I am there to look after them, but who is there to care for you? I serve you hot food lest you should fall ill.'

For the orphan boy, this supreme concern and



love must have opened a new dimension in his life. He was a very bright boy and, after completing his studies, became a top-level officer in the government. People who know him closely say that he leads a life of values and has helped many in need. One little kind act of a mother left an indelible impression on the mind of a young boy. He probably derives the strength to lead a life of values from

that act of genuine love.

Such revealing incidents may have come to your notice too. They bring insight into our lives, which sustains us without our being aware of it. But for such values, we would have lost faith in human kindness and love. Let us keep our eyes and ears open and learn from such unknown corners: *'bhadram karnebbih shrinuyama devah ...'* 



## Sripal's Story

**I**t has been a favourite dream of Sripal to feed as many people as he can.

The thirty-six-year-old vegetable vendor, who comes to our housing society every morning with his hand-driven cart, not only caters to the residents of the apartments. He distributes whatever vegetables are left after a day's sell to people who are poorer than he is. Even during the winter, when the vegetables can be kept fresh enough to be sold the next day, Sripal does not break his rule. When asked why he does not want to earn some extra bucks by selling the leftover vegetables at a price, he says, 'I do not know if God will be happy with my work and give me a fortune. But at the end of the day, I feel contented that I could feed a few starving families.'

Apparently, Sripal's achievement may seem to be trivial, but when one probes into his family conditions, it becomes clear how dedicated he is to the ideal of service to others. Coming from a family of agricultural labourers from a remote village in Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, Sripal is the sole breadwinner for a family of seven in his native home. Being the eldest of three brothers, he has to look after his aged parents' health, bear the expenses for the education of his siblings, and also take care of the upbringing of his two children. He has to pay rent for his *jhuggi* (shanty) in Delhi and also make arrangements for food not only for himself, but also for two others who

share his shanty.

But as long as people are happy, Sripal does not have any problem.

At a time when vegetable prices are soaring, one can see Sripal distributing plastic bags full of ladies' fingers, potatoes, cabbage, and carrots to the nearby slum dwellers, who make a beeline for him as soon as they spot his handcart. But Sripal is a strict disciplinarian. He makes sure that everyone gets an equal share, so he wants one member from each family to come to take the vegetables. He also insists that the same person should come every day; that helps him to recognize his beneficiaries and to ensure that a few households do not take the entire offering.

He carries a rickshaw puller's horn with him, and as soon as he comes inside the campus of our society he blows it. The first thirty minutes are for distribution; then he settles down to his business of selling vegetables to the residents. Does he make a profit? '*Wo to hisab nahi kiya*, I have not considered that seriously. My requirements are fulfilled and I have no complaints,' he says.

Ask him about his reward and he gives a shy smile. 'It's not a big thing I do. Why should I expect a reward?' he asks. You keep on insisting and he replies, 'A sound sleep at night. I go back with so much contentment that as soon as I hit the bed I fall asleep.'

—Shruba Mukherjee, New Delhi

# Following the Rainbow

R Anuradha

**T**HAT was my baptism by fire. It brought out a wiser me, a me which had been hidden and unidentified before. Of course, every experience in life makes one wise—but having or caring for someone who has cancer surely makes one wiser, braver, surer, and more confident.

It was about nine years back, during my first fight against cancer: I felt content to have access to good treatment in a renowned hospital and care at home, and for being in Delhi in a supportive and financially sound family. I still had the energy of youth, and was otherwise healthy enough to withstand the harsh treatment. I experienced the pain of devastating courses of chemotherapy, surgery, and radiotherapy that made me weaker day by day. There was the sorrow of having to suffer everything alone—it was something that could not be shared with anyone else. There were the couple of rare moments of self pity—that I was not able to live the active life I was used to. There was the anger about putting everyone around me to trouble. And there was my gaining knowledge of the disease and treatment. It was a ten-month long period of treatment; and it gave me, forever, immense confidence in myself and the treating doctors. I won't deny the constant presence of this underlying question—though it wasn't scary or bothersome—'How long am I going to live?'

In between, there was the period when my immunity was very very low. I was suffering from a throat infection which could have taken over any moment. The sand was fast falling from between my tightly closed fingers. I was expecting and wait-

ing to meet that never-before-experienced moment when I would stop living. I instinctively struggled and clung on to the thin thread of hope, never loosening my grip.

Life gave me a second, and a third chance: now I value and care for it in whichever form or shape it takes. I realized that life is beautiful indeed, that there is beauty in everyone. When we know life is fragile and uncertain, we automatically get out of the humdrum business of daily living and start focusing on our real pursuit. I learnt a few lessons the hard way.

In the treatment, I lost a part of my body which was functionally no more required. But in turn, I gained life. What more could I ask for? I also gained a purpose: to raise awareness about breast cancer among women, so that they might catch the disease in time for proper treatment, and so that many lives might not be wasted just for lack of information.

## *Someone's Thinking of Me*

During long waits for our turn for chemo- or radiotherapy sessions, or just to see a doctor at the government hospital, we women would casually talk about our disease, our conditions and problems, and I came face to face with the real shape of the society that cancer has carved out. People had little or no knowledge about the disease or the medications and their side effects. Both patients and their attendants suffered from ignorance and misconceptions about cancer. I thought they might lose the battle due to lack of information.

I realized that I was better-equipped than the other patients I met to fight the disease—I have always been a keen student of science—and could definitely help others with the information I had.

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I began with the most readily available and poignant tool for reaching out—talking to patients and their relatives and attendants, both individually and in groups. Attendants need to understand the physical and mental condition of a cancer patient in order to help her take the treatment properly and positively. I tell them, ‘Don’t run away. It’s just another disease which can be handled.’ Initially, they are not prepared to accept my suggestions, perhaps thinking me to be just another social worker, but when I tell them I am a survivor, that I have gone through all this, the ice breaks, they start asking questions, and we start bonding instantly. If I am able to make a difference in even one person’s life, I feel my life is worth living.

Telling a cancer patient about cancer and its treatment is not the same as telling a flu patient about antibiotics or antivirals. Cancer treatment involves chemotherapy, surgery, and radiotherapy. Cancer cells are abnormal and fast-growing. In chemotherapy, a combination of poisonous drugs is injected into the patient at regular intervals, targeting these abnormal cancer cells that form the tumour. But the drugs also kill normal fast-growing cells in the body, including blood cells and the cells forming the mucous lining of the mouth and oesophagus. As the number of red and white blood cells falls, the body loses strength and the immune system becomes weak. This weakness lasts for a few days. By the time the body recovers, it is time for the next round of injections. Cancer patients just

can’t afford to lose energy and time fighting germs. They must keep their surroundings scrupulously clean and hygienic, and avoid, as much as possible, contact with all germs. This is one area in which many people need to be educated.

Radiotherapy and breast surgery have many painful side effects which, if left untreated, could remain for life. In the cancer departments of government hospitals, doctors are overwhelmed with an ever-increasing number of patients. Their time is taken up in dealing with the major problems facing them, leaving them insufficient time to attend to smaller problems, important though they might be for the patient. I find here a role as counsellor, adviser, information provider, and listener.

During my treatment, whenever I found any informational literature about cancer, I would feel that there was someone who is thinking of me, trying to reach out to people like me living in the darkness of ignorance, and showing me the path towards light. Now that I have some knowledge, I try to share it with others who are undergoing cancer treatment. I have prepared a few information leaflets under the guidance of doctors of the breast cancer clinic at the All-India Institute of Medical Science where I was treated. I distribute these pamphlets—printed in simple Hindi and English on coloured paper—among cancer patients, to give them confidence, to reassure them that they are not alone, and to tell them about ways to overcome their seemingly dismal situation.

*Shanti Avedana Sadan inmates participate in a meditation session on the lawn*



### ***Living to the Fullest***

My treatment is over, but the battle against cancer goes on. Apart from regular hospital visits and off-and-on participation in awareness and check-up camps, I keep finding new ways to reach out to women in vulnerable age groups. At kitty parties in my friends’ circle, I casually start talking about breast cancer, and invariably, a woman or two in the group whose lives have been touched by cancer in some way or other speak up. I take this opportunity to tell them about breast self-examination, a

small and simple procedure that can reveal a cancerous tumour in its early stages, thus saving one's life. They know their bodies better than anybody else. The body is the instrument for any physical or spiritual activity. A woman's world revolves around her family, and her family revolves around her too. So her wellness is a key to the happiness of her family.

Follow-up examinations after the treatment is complete are equally important. Many cancer survivors dislike visiting again the hospital where they had unpleasant experiences. But avoiding the unpleasant will not make cancer go away. I try to help such people conquer their fears.

Helping unknown people—with whom I often become close for the few months of their treatment—makes me feel vibrantly alive. When I meet women who come back with the disease seven or ten years after their first treatment, my zeal to work harder gets still stronger—I know there are fair chances of my moving over to the patients' queue from my counsellor's seat.

For over two years I regularly visited the hospice care centre Shanti Avedana Sadan on Sundays. In simple words: the Sadan is a home for terminally ill cancer patients for whom treatment is not possible. The patients are given only palliative care. It is in human nature to have an indomitable inquisitiveness about how long one is going to live. Here, in Shanti Avedana, the question is more precise—'How many months? How many days?' When I talked with the patients, read short stories for them, or participated with them in enthusiastically-awaited paper art or stitching workshops and competitions, their faces glowed with bright smiles, as if saying they just lived their lives. Life is not to be measured in months or years, but in moments of happiness and completeness.

Many a time, when doctors can't do much for someone with terminal cancer, making a small effort to plunge with him or her in the stream of life does make a difference, though the change may not



*An inmate of Shanti Avedana Sadan plays an electric organ; his son sits by his side*

be dramatic. Telling a true story can bring a moment of peace to someone who spends days and nights in pain or in the intoxication of pain-killing drugs.

Suffering brings wisdom. We learn to put life to best use. If we are positive, good things can come out of the worst experiences. I thought of putting down all the encouragement, all the tips and bits of information I give to the people I meet in a sort of handbook and guide for women undergoing treatment for cancer. But, overwhelmed with emotion after meeting so many women in hospitals and other places, listening to their stories of misery and joy, what flowed from my pen was a memoir—*Indradhanush ke Pichhe-pichhe* (Following the Rainbow), a recollection of my good and bad experiences during and after cancer treatment that I wrote in gratitude for and in celebration of life.

There is so much to life. Life is not about spending days and years in this world, it is about living every day to the fullest as if there is no tomorrow. As the title of my book suggests, life is not always pink and shiny. Sometimes it falls in the grey part of the spectrum. But if we don't give up, we will see the bright colours again. PB

If one serves the sick and the distressed in the right spirit, in one single day one can get the highest spiritual realization.  
—Swami Turiyananda



# *The Radiant Smile*

**Ambika Prasad**

**S**UDDENLY a beautiful smile catches my eye, and I look again. The love, the serenity, and the genuineness in the smile dazzles me.

Such radiance I have tasted aplenty from almost as early as I can remember, sometimes as just a spark of light, but at times as a glowing sun. I notice the smile again, and pause to reflect on the best of such smiles that I have tasted in time. I recognize that it is these beams that make the possessors outstanding. The internal beauty of these persons emanates right through the external cloaks of their physical bodies, lighting up the world around them.

This lustrous visible projection of tenderness and equanimity that I yet again perceive, takes me far back in time to my bygone childhood, when I was barely ten years of age. I am now in the past in one of the most touching of such encounters—with a housemaid who helped us out for many years. Despite having a drunkard and squanderer for a husband and many young mouths to feed, this ever-smiling lady always lived through her day prayerfully. She diligently arrived at our doorstep long before the children of the household stirred into action. Never asking for any favours and never giving vent to any negative emotions, she strove to do more than her best. Again, no matter what she had to encounter as part of each struggling day, this self-possessed lady never quit. Dealing with genuine love in her glowing manner with everyone in her small world, she showed all of us that selfless love can be true.

The clock ticks away and I am now in my early teens. Once again I am basking in the warmth of

such luminosity. This time it is springing from ‘Aunty’, who is a family friend. Here I observe wholly compliant endurance of both financial hardship and persistently harassing relatives. Aunty’s responsibilities of managing her large joint family demanded that she contribute financially as well. Since she was not qualified for paid employment, she fulfilled this duty by taking on regular paying guests, who occupied a fair portion of their small city apartment. Their tight monetary situation was aggravated by the unanticipated needs of school-going children. Food, which was rationed out for all dwellers in the city, was also scarce. Those who could not buy groceries on the black market had to be extra vigilant. Despite these arduous circumstances, this devout lady always went out of her way to help everyone that she could in her world. Whenever Aunty learnt of any friend in need, she hastened to complete her own duties and make her way to where aid was required, to do all that she could in order to ease matters. Yet another remarkable quality in Aunty was that she viewed every visitor to her house as a form of the Lord, and she served each one with love, mustering whatever food she could on the day. We as children invariably chose to visit Aunty’s house even over those of more affluent people. We later realized that we were not alone in doing this, and that the longing we felt was not just for the delicious food that came our way but more so for the love and care that accompanied it. As we matured, we understood that Aunty’s world expanded pretty quickly; almost everyone in the community knew her. We realized that it is possible to form wonderful relationships with genuine divine love. We also realized that her cooking tasted so good not because it was exotic or costly, but because it was filled with God-centred

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love. Much later in life we gathered that in order to serve people in this manner, Auntie had often to go without her quota of food. Soon I associated her with the fragrance of a rose combined with the purity of a lotus.

I am moving along the time line, but during this leg of travel, I do not need to go far to see the now-familiar brilliance. I see two vivid glows. I stop and look closer: of course, they have to be my friend's parents—Auntie and Uncle. They are a householder couple who consciously practised living a totally God-centred life. The only sound emanating from their house was devotional music, for Auntie was an accomplished musician who channelled her love for music to composing and singing songs in praise of the Lord and voluntarily teaching them to all who were interested. Uncle, her husband, committed himself fully to organizing and promoting discourses on Vedanta. Love for God and encouraging others on the spiritual path formed their mission in life. Their home was always an 'open house'. People dropped in constantly, not only to participate in the devout undertaking of this holy couple, but also at times just to bathe in the affection that Auntie and Uncle had to offer. After the early morning prayers, Auntie would cook a simple meal, not just for the family, but also for whoever might drop in. All visitors knew that they were welcome to partake of the meal whenever they called. Auntie and Uncle could by no means be described as monetarily affluent, but in their love and service to all who turned towards them, they were richer than the richest.

Uncle chose to work part-time, allowing him to focus on a more important facet of life than making money. Moreover, Auntie always felt that her offering to the Lord could not be given with a fee attached to it. The little that they managed—by scrimping and saving—to set aside was reserved for

any worthy cause. This meant that the family lived just meeting their basic necessities; this was all that they ever wanted. As they grew up, the children of the house walked the same path so tenderly chalked out by their parents. They all lived to show us that God can be seen and experienced through genuine smiles, heartfelt generosity, and open warmth.

Once more I journey along the wheel of time; yet again I do not travel far to taste the brilliance of compassion. I do not have to wonder to whom this radiance belongs. This caring hand that guided me right through my teens and into my adulthood

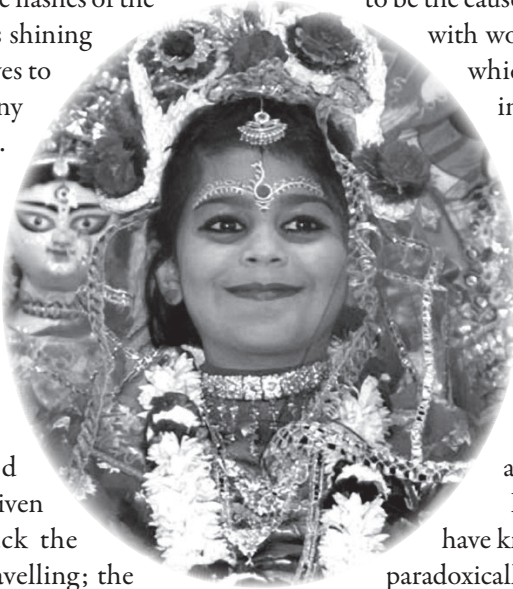
belonged to one of the noblest people that

I have known. Who was she? She was a practitioner of medicine, almost of my mother's age in body, but ageless in spirit. She lived the life of a nun, but outside the confines of any organization—for she wanted to personally look after her widower father, a duty that her siblings could not take on. She used her earnings from her paid job at a hospital to care for her father, run her own free clinic for the poor, regularly feed the children at a

nearby orphanage, and assist students who could not afford to pay for their school textbooks. She brought joy to the many that received her generosity. She organized weekly bhajan sessions for the neighbourhood children for their spiritual uplift. Almost everyone who came into contact with her was drawn into her fold. As I became more aware of the most common reasons for people's actions—name, fame, and money—I also realized that she never had such expectations from anyone. How could she, when none whom she helped were in any position to repay her either in kind or in deed? It was only years later, when she was no more, that I learnt that she had long suffered from a few chronic ailments. To me, she lived to illustrate that the world can be transformed through love for God manifested as selfless service to all.



I am swept along the time line once again. I notice that I have returned to the present. Even here, at close range, I perceive flashes of the now-so-familiar dazzle. It is shining out from someone who strives to promote peace and harmony in the sphere of her world. Particularly remarkable is the detached way in which she meets life's challenges. The major life-challenge that came to this lady, when she was in her early twenties—an age when most people are galloping on—would have drowned many a person. A truck, driven by a drunken driver, struck the coach in which she was travelling; the accident left her without her right arm. It was a seeming disaster: her life as she knew it came to a halt. However, she was not defeated. She learnt to use her remaining hand, not only to write, but also to perform all the tasks of daily life. She was compelled by her parents to marry. The young man whom she wed is also sincerely dedicated to selfless service. Though never ritualistic, this young woman sees God in every form, so much so that



*Reflecting the Divine*

she desists from even plucking a flower from its life-giving source, the plant, as she does not want to be the cause of possible pain. I am struck with wonder by the 'normalcy' with which she carries out her duties, including a paid job, and the persistence with which she helps all the needy people who enter her life. The way she was able to lift herself from dire calamity, and with sustained acceptance of her situation as God's grace, continue on the path of selfless service, is a true inspiration to me.

I have travelled a long way. I have known some people who were paradoxically ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. Their domains in this world have been different, and their knowledge of why they are treading their chosen paths varying. However, I know that they are all in unison in their goal of pure, selfless, and continual service to God through service to humankind. These experiences stir me to strengthen myself, to strive hard, for I too wish to smile the radiant smile of love, warmth, and peace.



**D**espondency is not religion, whatever else it may be. By being pleasant always and smiling, it takes you nearer to God, nearer than any prayer. How can those minds that are gloomy and dull love? If they talk of love, it is false; they want to hurt others. Think of the fanatics; they make the longest faces, and all their religion is to fight against others in word and act. Think of what they have done in the past, and of what they would do now if they were given a free hand. They would deluge the whole world in blood tomorrow if it would bring them power. By worshipping power and making long faces, they lose every bit of love from their hearts. So the man who always feels miserable will never come to God. It is not religion, it is diabolism to say, 'I am so miserable.'

Every man has his own burden to bear. If you are miserable, try to be happy, try to conquer it.

God is not to be reached by the weak. Never be weak. You must be strong; you have infinite strength within you. How else will you conquer anything? How else will you come to God? At the same time you must avoid excessive merriment, Uddharsha, as it is called. A mind in that state never becomes calm; it becomes fickle. Excessive merriment will always be followed by sorrow. Tears and laughter are near kin. People so often run from one extreme to the other. Let the mind be cheerful, but calm. Never let it run into excesses, because every excess will be followed by a reaction.

—*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4.11

# *They Only Live Who Live for Others*

**Shashank Grahacharjya**

## ***The Healing Touch***

I HAD been to a small town a few kilometres from the silver city, Cuttack, in connection with the purchase of a plot of land. A property broker guided me to the patch of land, which lay near a rice mill. After locating the plot, we took a short route to the main road. There was a hillock of paddy husk behind the rice mill. A few poor women were gathering what broken rice they could find in the husk. We noticed them but paid them no heed. They saw us, but tried to hide themselves, presuming that we were employees of the mill, who often harassed them. I was told that the employees restrict the women from such collection.

It was a bright March morning. The rays of the morning sun, the feel of the cool breeze, the fresh look of dew-bathed green grass all around were taking me away from myself. Moreover, the fancy words of the broker coupled with my soon-to-be fulfilled aspirations towards becoming a landlord were exciting my mind. I was completely lost in our discussions. Suddenly I felt a burning sensation on my feet. I took a few bold and fast steps, each step plunging into the husk-ash pile, causing serious irritation. Neither the broker nor I had sensed the fire beneath the surface of the paddy-husk hillock. I shouted at the top of my voice for help. To add to my misery, I was wearing a pair of chappals instead of shoes. I started jumping in pain, trying to run away from there. Each jump was leading me to a hotter patch of embers. Each step was taking me to a more difficult situation. My chappals had fallen off my feet. I hardly noticed what the poor broker

was passing through, but just warned him to take care and run away.

Suddenly I saw a couple of women rushing to rescue me. ‘Hey, come this way,’ they shouted. I took a turn. They extended a stick and pulled me to safety. Within a second, I was next to them. Risking exposure to the fire, one of the women dragged my chappals clear while I was pleading with them to leave the footwear where they were. Another woman wiped the sweat running down my face with her sari and started fanning me. She cleaned my feet and advised me to put them under cool, running water for some time—something that the broker was already doing at a stream nearby. He too had injuries.

I was feeling miserable. I asked the woman why she had risked herself. She paused. Her words came from deep within her heart. Her throat was choking up. She responded, ‘Would I not have done that, had you been my son?’ and touched my chin with a smile. Never had I experienced such an unambiguous, innocent, and confident touch and smile in my life. What a healing touch! Punched with physical pain and mental joy, tears oozed out of my eyes. I fail to understand why women—mothers—always risk themselves to eliminate the suffering of others!

After administering first aid, the staff of the rice mill shifted us to the nearby hospital. We took a few days’ rest as per the doctor’s advice. Now we are fine. I have been to the rice mill many a time after that, but have never seen those women again. I wonder if they have been prevented from visiting the area after that incident. They saved me from fire; I do not know what measures they take now to extinguish the fire in their stomach!

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### A Slap on the Face

In day-to-day life, our profession puts us in many embarrassing situations which could normally be avoided. But we make false commitments—most of the time with no bad intentions. We judge ourselves by our intentions, but others by their actions. On introspection, we find how hollow we are—and how genuine are they whom the so-called professional humbug has hardly touched.

It was a nearly a decade ago that I went on a visit to a remote village in Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan to monitor the feeding programme under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). There were hardly any other villages close by, and one had to travel 10–15 kilometres to reach the next one. The village was in a desert area, close to the Pakistan border. I reached the village at about 9 a.m., without having given any notice beforehand. I finished my work, which took about an hour or so. As a part of the job, I interacted with the villagers, especially the mothers who benefited from the programme.

A group of women, on learning from my chauffeur that I had not yet had breakfast, insisted that I have roti and *chhanch* (buttermilk) with them. Anticipating a delay in the programme and having plans to cover a few more villages, I politely requested them to excuse me for not being able to honour their invitation. With a customary smile on my face, I pleaded in many ways to allow me to proceed further. By then, we had walked through half of the village. I had put one foot inside the vehicle and was managing to wave hands to say a 'goodbye'. One middle-aged woman had been holding my hand affectionately for a long time. I tried to escape from her by saying, '*Dubara jab aunga to zarur kha ke jaunga*; When I come next, I shall definitely have food at your place.' She threw my hand suddenly and countered, with moist eyes, '*Tum to barish ki tarah ate ho*; You come like the rain (in the desert).' The whole situation turned grave. No more laughter, no more giggles. It was serious. I was caught! I had no other option but to follow her like an innocent child to have a bite of the roti she had kept, as if only for me. Another woman fanned me with a

hand-fan which she had nicely designed.

I am unable to balance the value of that roti and glass of buttermilk with the tons of food materials provided under the feeding programme. We, the so-called officials, show our superficial busy schedules and make many false promises and give vague assurances without respecting the sentiments of others who genuinely render their love and affection even to a stranger like me. I always remember this tender slap on the face whenever I visit a village.

### A Lamp for Sanjib

Sanjib and I had been good friends since our school days. Both of us were branded as naughty, though averagely studious, amongst our classmates. Sanjib was an athlete. He had many medals to his credit. He had a handsome and well-built physique. We had common interests in cricket and theatre. However, we changed streams in higher secondary studies, and changed colleges for graduation.

Later, Sanjib fell into bad company. He was exposed to and got habituated to smoking and drinking. He could not score well in examinations, though he managed to complete his graduation. His late-night arrivals at home were obviously not acceptable to family members. He preferred to stay in a rented house. Friends initially paid the rent and converted the house into a bar. Later on, he had to pay all bills, including those for food and beverages for others.

Common friends used to say then, 'Sanjib behaves well only with Shashank.' Yes, I believe so too. I had never seen him the way he was known amongst others. A couple of times, I attempted to know from him why bad words about him were spreading around. Silence was his only answer all through.

Five years ago, after a decade of separation, we met again when I spotted Sanjib in my hometown, Cuttack—the millennium city whose people are known for their *bhai-chara* (camaraderie). He was quite disturbed and tense. I learnt that he had been staying in the city for the last six months. He had his own reasons for not keeping in touch with me. In fact, he did not have contact with anyone even in the *mohalla* (colony) he was staying in. No one had

any idea about what Sanjib was up to or what he was doing. In the city of *bhai-chara*, he was leading the life of a *bechara*, a poor fellow without a friend.

Inhabitants of the mohalla did finally get to know Sanjib. It happened like this. There was a widow in her early forties, Basanti by name, who was staying in the same mohalla a few yards away from Sanjib's room, with her only son Babula, a boy of twelve. Basanti and Sanjib had not met; neither was Babula friendly with Sanjib. When Sanjib returned to the mohalla after a long hectic journey and two sleepless nights, he found, to his great surprise, the whole mohalla passively witnessing the distress of a widow. Babula had contracted cerebral malaria and died. There was no one to help Basanti in conducting Babula's last rites. Though there were many young, educated, and sensitive men around,

each one had the fear of being questioned or interrogated by others. Many ifs and buts were bothering them. She had none to give solace to her. Sanjib could not stand it any longer. He had the strength and conviction to face any interrogation. He took the dead body to the crematorium next to the Dakshina Kali temple, met all the required formalities, and conducted the rituals. Others had sympathized, but Sanjib acted.

I learnt much later that Sanjib lost his life in a road accident. I do not know who conducted the last rites for him. Who was or were his friends then? Definitely not me, though I claim to have had good friendship with him! But of one thing I am sure: Basanti would have offered a lamp for him at the Dakshina Kali Temple if she had heard about Sanjib's death.



## Ego to Egolessness

**O**n the human plane we can all understand and admire the ideal of unselfishness, or egolessness. In fact, it is the moral and social orders which form the preliminary basis for spiritual life; and the principle underlying that moral or social life is egolessness, selflessness. The more we deny the little self, the more we free ourselves from the ego, the greater our expansion. A selfish and ignorant and egotistic person also knows and understands the ideal of selflessness; by the very fact that he resents selfishness in another. Therefore, until we free ourselves from this ego, there can be no spiritual expansion. It is our experience in the ordinary plane that the more we deny ourselves, the greater is our happiness and expansion; but the real task comes when we understand that this little self must be completely wiped out; that this little self is the ignorant self and that it must die in order that we may be born in spirit. What is this birth in spirit? It is egolessness. Ego is the barrier between the spirit and the flesh. Remove that barrier, remove that obstruction, and your life will be flooded with the spirit.

There are two methods by which this ego can be wiped out. These methods are known as Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge, and Bhakti Yoga, the path of

devotion and self-surrender. ... Jnana Yoga teaches us to deny that little self, and assert God or the higher Self by analysis, by trying to find that unchangeable Reality which is within. This sense of ego ... is an illusion. It has not that same degree of reality that the Atman or the real Self has, therefore, why cling to this false self? For by so doing, you remain subject to the wheel of birth and death, happiness and misery. ... The truth of the Self which is one with God is to be heard about from teachers who have known that Truth. ... First we must hear about it from the scriptures and teachers, and then we must reason upon it. Mere intellectual acceptance will not do. Then, realizing that there is that one unchangeable absolute Reality, we must meditate upon that truth.

With Bhakti Yoga, the path of devotion ... we find that no attempt is made to rid oneself of the ego at the very beginning. There are two egos, which Sri Ramakrishna called the unripe ego and the ripe ego. The unripe ego is that which denotes selfishness—that sense of 'me and mine', and of this ego we must rid ourselves; the ripe ego is that which unites itself with God; 'I am a child of God, I belong to God', and so forth. This ripe ego ultimately leads to egolessness.

—Swami Prabhavananda

# *Experiencing the Spirit in Prison*

**Tracy Lee Kendall**

I AM writing from Coffield Unit, the largest men's prison in Texas, USA. This unit has a capacity of around four thousand men, but normally, the population is around thirty-six to thirty-eight hundred or so. In many ways, there are fewer stimuli here to distract us. There is also a fair amount of despondency. Most of us begin to search for either hope, or something to deaden the impact which incarceration has upon us, or something to occupy our time. Whatever we choose to pursue, if we find something to hold on to, we usually do so with an intense focus which may even border on fanaticism.

Before we discuss some examples of spirituality being expressed at Coffield, I will try to convey the sense of the spiritual dimension that I refer to in this article. In Vedanta, we focus on the conclusion of sacred knowledge acquired from teachers, scriptures, or other sources. It is the resulting experience which matters. Zen Buddhism represents this perfectly with its example of the finger and the moon. The finger can point the way to the moon, but to experience the moon, one must leave the finger and go to the moon oneself. The finger, of course, represents the teachers and writings which speak of the Absolute, and the moon represents the Absolute. While the majority of people in the world may stereotype spiritual expressions and experiences as relating only to religious practices and scriptures—and often spiritual expressions, experiences, and realizations *do* occur during times of religious practice and study—it is important to remember that spiritual expressions, experiences, and realizations manifest through or from the Living

Spirit itself, even though the catalyst may take the form of spoken words, silence, a book, religion, a gentle breeze, or anything else. We must be careful not to confuse the catalyst with the manifestation of Spirit, because, if we do, we may fail to notice the rich spiritual manifestations emanating from sources we may not deem 'religious' enough or 'upstanding' enough to be capable of spiritual expression or experience. Some people would rather trust a preacher holding a gun to their head than a drug addict or thief trying to help them. This illustration may seem a little shocking, but it is far more shocking to see how many in the world will follow 'righteous' appearances and soothing words into oblivion before they will accept being led to the Truth by sources towards which they hold unfounded prejudices. Divinity works through many forms, and often those forms may not be ones which we would expect to function within spiritual realms of interaction.

## ***The Spiritual Path at Coffield***

We at Coffield often find some type of spiritual path or become more involved in a spiritual pursuit which we had before incarceration. To put it bluntly, there are three prevalent outcomes of spiritual endeavours here: (i) We will give up and go to a more carnal mode of existence; (ii) We will practise a dry image of some religion without making spiritual progress, doing more harm than good because desperate clinging will narrow our minds into bigotry, hypocrisy, and a carnal mode of proclaiming religion; or (iii) We will come into a true state of revealed and living spirituality. Who is who is not always easy to discern at first glance. A person's character is not always what it appears to be. One may seem to be indifferent, but in actuality be

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deeply involved. What looks like hostility can often be 'rigid compassion'. Spiritual 'proclamations' are many times empty, self-serving ravings, and individuals who seem to carry no outward signs of spirituality frequently turn out to be deeply spiritual.

The spiritual paths mainly represented here are various denominations of Christianity and a few sects of Islam, but there are also many other spiritual paths represented with a smaller number of adherents. There are a few Hindus on this unit; there is one Vedantist, one Kashmir Shaivist, and a few others. There are some Buddhists of Zen and other sects. Then there are adherents of other paths including Native American spirituality, Gnosticism, mysticism, Judaism, Ásatrú, Wicca, and a number of others. Our biggest obstacles to genuine spiritual expression and experience come in two forms the majority of the time: bigotry, which causes us to be occupied with anger and religious elitism instead of focusing on spiritual progress, and confusion about the difference between spiritual expression and spiritual experience.

### ***Spiritual Expression***

Spiritual expression and experience are giving and receiving. Expression is giving, something we convey to the outside. Experience has more to do with receiving, something happening to us which has an impact on the inside. A good example of the importance of both giving and receiving is the allegory of the Red Sea and the Dead Sea. Both are located in the same geographic region, yet the Red Sea is thriving with life while the Dead Sea is, well, dead. Why are they so different? The answer is that one both gives and receives while the other just receives. The Red Sea receives new and fresh water which cleanses it; and the old water flows out to other places, giving them greatly needed water and minerals as well. The Dead Sea merely receives water flowing into it, never giving any out. The result is that it is never cleaned out and impurities and salt build up so that no fish or plants can live in it. It is just a barren hole filled with salt water. Likewise, we must have a balance of giving and receiving in

our spiritual life. Only receiving greedily puts us at risk of building up impurities and blockage, and only giving can cause us to fail to hold on to enrichments we need to grow spiritually. One indicator of a genuine spiritual aspirant is that he or she displays a balance of expression as well as experience.

Humans are almost inherently attracted to the phenomenon of duality, so it is no surprise that not only are there a multitude of types of spiritual expression, but there are also many personal adaptations of these spiritual expressions. It is no different at Coffield. We come to a point where we grasp a spiritual ideal, and then our inclinations take it in a direction of expression. Some of us use very outspoken modes of spiritual expression. At times, inmates can be found giving sermons or conducting study sessions in our chapel or dayrooms (dayrooms are areas where we can congregate or watch television) or on the recreation yards. Some of these sermons are genuine spiritual expressions promoting love, understanding, unity, and spiritual progress. Others are merely bigoted expositions promoting nothing but ostracism and prejudices. As odd as this may sound, these are needed as well; they help us to recognize the warning signs of a build-up of negativity within ourselves, so we can deal with it accordingly before we fall. Expression through sharing also occurs quietly in smaller groups amongst us.

Our worship also includes varied forms of spiritual expression. The Christians and Muslims here have large communal prayers and services as well as their solitary and personal prayers and worship. Native Americans, Jews, and Odinists are given the option of being transferred to certain prison units which are better suited to facilitate their spiritual paths, and the rest of us must make do with very limited facilitation. We must find ways to express ourselves through our worship and practice which, even though harmless, may include items considered contraband which we could even be disciplined for having. My worship includes japa, prayer, meditation, as well as attempting to make my life itself a spiritual expression (easier said than



done, I'm still trying to figure out how to do it). For worship, I also have an offering vessel I fashioned which I could get into trouble for having.

Expressing ourselves spiritually to our Deity can be difficult, but expressing ourselves spiritually to each other is usually a little more complicated. This is not just because we must learn to see the Deity in each other, but also because here, expressing ourselves spiritually to another person can actually invite hostility from him or another who may happen to be observing. It takes courage and sincerity here to share genuine expressions of spirituality, and these expressions are absolutely vital for spiritual enlightenment and also to keep the pain and corruption of this place from rising up and engulfing us, smothering us into an animalistic existence.

The deepest forms of spiritual expression are those in which we reach out to help or minister to another (though these acts are often not even recognized as forms of spiritual expression)—times when we are moved by our spirit to tend to another's needs, whether those needs be friendship, food, love, or spiritual interaction; when we are there for someone through difficulties he faces time after time, when we stand in solidarity with another in support without ever turning our backs on him leaving him in the cold, when we accept someone unconditionally without expectations, when we help another purely in the spirit of service, when we believe in someone regardless of the circumstances, when we foster tranquillity and bliss in the life of another, when we help bring others closer to God.

Genuine spiritual expression is found beyond religions and books and philosophies, within the heart of our spirit and love. Mostly I see this here amongst the least respected inmates. When I was not in prison, I saw it mostly displayed amongst the poor and outcasts of society, and I am willing to bet that if we look to the poor, downtrodden, and ostracized we encounter every day, beneath the dirt our prejudices and false perceptions heap upon them, we will find a strength of character and genuine spiritual expression shining through far brighter than most.

### ***Spiritual Experience***

Where can the description of spiritual experience begin? Spiritual expression usually involves a conveyance of some type into the physical realm, so it is not especially difficult to perceive it when it comes from another individual. Spiritual experience occurs more in the spiritual realm than the physical, so unless we have an experience similar to or identical with another's, we can only know our own spiritual experiences. When someone describes a spiritual experience, it becomes a spiritual expression, but this too is important because it can help explain or prepare us for our own experiences, especially if the described spiritual experience resembles our own.

Inmates here have shared descriptions of various experiences they have had over the years which they consider spiritual. Some are rather fantastic, such as a vision of the chapel opening up into heaven, or vile demons tempting them in certain ways. One person shared a dream about an elephant who he believed was Ganesha sending some grand message, though he never figured out exactly what it was. A spiritual experience people seem to have here frequently is God telling them they will get out of prison. Quite a few have shared a kind of experience in which God has proclaimed them a prophet or revealed to them a truth which will save the world if everyone would heed them. Some spiritual experiences which others have told me about I wouldn't even know how to begin to explain. There is an endless list. However, I do not belittle or exalt any spiritual experience below or above any other. They are all important and promote life-changing circumstances. Mine may seem simple and not so interesting, but I know they are right for me. I experience peace and stillness. I find moments of clear, not thought driven, discernment. I feel Divine Love and Hope regardless of my circumstances. There are glimpses of Truth I strive to see better, and feelings of the Unity of everything. What should be given priority is revealed and all else is shown to be the nothing that it is. At times, everything just stops and I experience something I

could never express but I hope everyone gets to experience, *tat tvam asi*—thou art That—or at least I get close enough to know It is True and continue to strive to reach It. Throughout my life, regardless of what I was practising or if I was practising anything, these have been the nature of my spiritual experiences. I attempt to permeate my life with them more and more, and the results are both discernable as well as enriching to my life and spiritual journey. I hope they may be enriching in some way

to those around me as well.

This has been an attempt to share a little about spiritual expressions and experiences that others and I have here, and the understanding I have come to concerning them. I pray it helps you—whether in the understanding of or application to others or yourself—and I encourage you to express yourselves spiritually and seek spiritual experiences, whatever they may be and wherever they may take you in the positive directions. Om.



## The Boy in Cell D-103

He told me about the guy in a cell down the row  
who—

when he can't sleep—  
rattles the sink pipes,

broadcasting the noise into all the other cells,  
ensuring that no one else will sleep  
either.

And he said how sad it makes him  
(his eyes tearing up)  
what they did to Jesus,

'who was so good,'  
he said.

The balance of good and evil in prison  
is about equal,  
he tells me

(he, who is 19 years old—  
what can he know of evil?)

He,

(shy, hunchbacked, learning disabled,  
speech impaired—  
the sort who has been  
made fun of all his life)

He

(I should mention his eyes—  
languid and lonely)  
has organized some of the men  
to pray at the same time every night.

At 10.30, he blinks his light on and off.  
The guy in the cell across the way blinks his ...  
lights flicker up and down the row  
of cells.

This is the signal.

Then,

in the silence that follows,  
the inmates seek God.

—Janice Thorup, St Louis

# The Divine within Us All

Janice Thorup

EVERY Tuesday morning, a group of clients in an agency that serves the homeless mentally ill gather for a writing workshop. I am the group's facilitator. We meet in a stuffy, windowless conference room for an hour. For each meeting, I prepare three topics as writing prompts. Over coffee and donuts, we write. We read our writing aloud to one another. We write again. We read again. We laugh. Sometimes we cry. Now and then we pat each other on the back or put an arm around the shoulder of someone who's having a hard time.

At the end of each session, I gather the writing and type it, making sparse suggestions for change, often formatting the writing as poetry. Quarterly, we self-publish the poems and distribute the xeroxed publications to clients and staff. I love this work. I love these people. I am enriched by seeing the world as they see it. I am in awe of their courage and their kindness and their joy.

I am also inspired by the nearness of God in their lives. Some grew up going to church, but many of them did not. And yet all of them have an awareness of the Divine that runs deep and personal. It is almost as if their mental illnesses allow them access to something that is denied those of us whose minds work in more traditional ways. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James speaks of 'fields of consciousness', which vary in size from person to person and within each person from time to time. People of genius and people living with mental illness, he says, often access the margins of these fields, where 'they shoot beyond the field into still remoter regions of objectivity, regions which we seem rather to be about

to perceive than to perceive actually'.<sup>1</sup>

These 'remote regions of objectivity' are given voice in the writing group. The depth of suffering and the pinnacles of joy experienced by those in our group give rise to poetry and reflections on life that are deeply moving and engaging.

The writing group grew out of a qualitative research project on services to those who are homeless and living with severe and persistent mental illnesses. I interviewed eleven men and women living with schizophrenia, the most alienating of mental illnesses (perhaps because it represents what we most fear—chaos, loss of control, and interior darkness). The men and women I interviewed for this project spoke of spiritual encounters with the Divine that they could not share with their case workers or psychiatrists, who inevitably dismissed them as hallucinations.

And so I started the writing group—a place where expressing deep experiences would be allowed and encouraged. Because I am not a therapist (my function in the agency is grant writing and research), the clients who attend the writing group are not reluctant to speak of their innermost feelings. Indeed they are eager to do so.

Eleanor<sup>2</sup> is a charter member of the group. In our first sessions, Eleanor's writing chronicled the horrific abuse she suffered as a child. It was shocking and wrenching—difficult to read. Because we share our writing aloud and because others in the group had also suffered abuse, Eleanor's subjects became the norm for the group. I found this disturbing and unproductive and depressing. I was learning about only part of their lives and not by far the more interesting part. One day a friend said to me that those who are homeless or battered or living with mental illnesses are not so different from

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Mrs Janice Thorup is a writer and social worker from St Louis.

you and me. ‘Your job,’ she said, ‘is to help them find the ways in which their lives are blessed.’

And so we took a new tack. I made a deal with Eleanor. For every story of abuse, she had to write another story about something good that had happened to her in the same time period. Her first story of goodness was couched in a story of abuse. At the age of fourteen, she’d been sent to live with her married sister whose husband began to sexually abuse her. Eleanor’s sister lived in the country and was boarding a quarter horse for some extra money. Eleanor was given the job of feeding and watering the horse and mucking out the stable. At first timid, later emboldened by the horse’s acceptance of her, Eleanor learned to ride the horse bareback. And from this horse—a horse!—she learned how to love. The horse gave her the kind of love she had never experienced from human beings, and she returned the love without fear of abuse. In time, Eleanor came to realize that she was capable not only of being loved but of loving. Early on, she wrote this poem:

Love is so fragile  
Like a drop of dew  
On a spider’s web.

Most often, no matter what writing prompt I present, the writing group members write about God. Their understanding is deep and often more oriental than occidental. A young, transgender man with bipolar disease, who has but an eighth grade education and no previous exposure to organized religion, wrote a poem called ‘Balance Equals Oneness’:

I can be a man or woman  
In balance I know I’m both  
  
I can be good or evil  
In balance I know I’m both  
  
I can be the prayer or the preacher  
In balance I know I’m both  
  
I can be you or me  
In balance I know we are the same  
  
I can be God or the sinner  
In balance I know we are one.

The poet describes a personal theology consonant with some of the most difficult teachings of Vedanta, particularly the recognition that God encompasses both good and evil. Another poem by the same author speaks of his maturing understanding of God:

Before  
God was angry, damning,  
spiteful and bigoted  
  
Now  
God is Unconditional love and light  
the very soul of every being—  
  
human and non-human,  
seen and unseen,  
  
the universe and all its glory,  
the very nature of life.  
  
That force is within us all.

This young man’s confused sexual identity has led him into devastating and abusive relationships. He considers himself a woman trapped in a man’s body, and his discomfort over the disparity between his outer and inner selves disappears only when he contemplates God.

He is a lonely man who seems to fit with neither women nor men, but he finds himself accepted unconditionally in the writing group. The mutual support our members offer one another and the deep sharing of their life experiences is important for all of us. And because their skills of expression are being sharpened in the group, our clients are beginning to communicate with a wider audience—including those of you reading this article.

Those who suffer from schizophrenia are often thought to be unintelligible. But their experiences of God are not so different from those of the world’s mystics. Indeed, perhaps the difference is simply the ability of the mystic to communicate such experiences to others.

Living with mental illness is not easy. The stigma assigned to mental illnesses causes us to set the mentally ill apart. Many are wary of approaching those who are living with schizophrenia and bipolar disease, loathe to converse with them, shy of



befriending them. Imagine a life in which the only people who care about you are paid to do so. This is the case of many with mental illnesses.

Devastating as the illness and lifestyle can be, however, the members of my writing group live lives full of wonder and blessedness. While many have delusions—thinking characters on the TV can see them or cars can talk to them—most group members are easy on themselves, sometimes amused by these thoughts in their heads, rising above them when they are able and suffering them when they are not.

Lenora is a deeply psychotic woman nearly lost to drug abuse. Our agency has worked to help her find housing, but she never stays housed for more than a month or so, and she spends weeks at a time living on the streets. The following is from a poem written when she returned to the group after having slept on the streets for several weeks. She titled it ‘So Deeply is God with Me’:

I became a victim of cocaine.  
But God’s presence gave me peace.  
  
I was a lost, stray person, but  
most places I went,  
    God’s presence was close and near.

I sat on the street corner—  
    God’s presence was there.  
I walked down dark alleys—  
    God’s presence was there.  
I laid down in ditches—  
    God’s presence was there.

He calmed the rough areas  
that were in my mind and in my heart  
as I walked each day in search for myself.

In speech, Lenora is barely able to communicate her thoughts, which are disjointed and confused. But on paper, she is articulate and clear and poetic. God is real to her even when she cannot make herself real to others.

The poems created in our writing group portray a breathtaking immediacy and intimacy of relationship with God. Rene, living in a violent domestic situation, is nonetheless full of sunshine when she is able to get away from her partner and make it

to the writing group. Her sense of God as a close friend is evident in this poem:

**October 6, 9:35 a.m.**

Every morning I go outside to feel the day.  
As I came out the door this morning,  
I look up into the sky and  
what do I see but the moon,  
partially hidden by the clouds.

The dazzling sun is to my left  
shining ever so brightly and  
then there’s the moon.

I’ve never seen anything like this before—  
the sun and the moon in the sky  
    at the same time!

And as I marvel about what I’m seeing,  
it’s as if God Himself came down and  
tapped me on my shoulder and said,  
‘Honey, this is for you.’


Eleanor’s characterization of God in the following poem is similarly close and humorous:

**Dancing with God**

I don’t think  
He would mind  
if I stepped on His toes.  
  
He would understand how that goes.  
  
He knows  
as a teacher  
that there will be times  
of tender toes.

Sometimes it seems to me that the members of my writing group fall into Abraham Maslow’s description of a self-actualizing person: ‘insightful neurotic[s] ... understanding and accepting [of] the intrinsic human situation, facing and accepting courageously and even enjoying, being amused by the shortcomings of human nature instead of trying to deny them.’<sup>3</sup>

I can attest to the magnificence of spirit of those who are living with mental illnesses. I have discovered minds without boundaries that seem to encompass and embrace phenomena the rest of us have successfully kept at bay. The folks in my writing group—as well as others living with severe men-

tal illnesses—are worth knowing. They are often my spiritual guides, providing inspiration and courage couched in humility and openness. I hope that in reading their poetry and understanding a bit of their life stories you, too, will be inspired. I hope that in our society of human beings, we will come to embrace and befriend those with severe mental illnesses, recognizing their spiritual gifts and their ability to lead us closer to God. 

### Notes and References

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 255–6.
2. I have identified the clients in the writing group by their first names or by pen names they have chosen. They have given permission to publish their poetry and photographs.
3. Abraham H Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968), 115.



Writing group participants Antone, Detra, Bruce, and Tina (clockwise from top left)

### Early Prison Work

In 1911, Swami Somananda (1872–1937), a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, commenced a unique service of God in man. The government of Mysore had requested him to give moral and religious instruction in Kannada and Telugu to the convicts in the Bangalore Central Jail. Swami Brahmananda, to whom Swami Somananda had written about this proposal, encouraged him to take up this work and wrote to him, ‘I assure you of our best wishes and blessings in the endeavour you have been called upon to make on behalf of these helpless creatures.’ Swami Somananda began the work in February 1911, and sustained it for nearly twenty-six years. The work was later continued by other swamis of the Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore.

The swami would visit the jail every Sunday morning between 7.30 and 9, travelling in the government’s state carriage, through the arrangement of Swami Nirmalananda, then head of the ashrama. Swami Somananda would read to the inmates, numbering about 500, from the Bhagavata, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other Hindu scriptures and give them religious instruction. The jail inmates would also decorate pictures of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The swami influenced their lives, awakened their latent humanity and divinity,

and brought about a complete reformation in the lives of many of the prisoners.

To minister to the moral and spiritual needs of the prisoners after their release from prison, a temple named Sri Ramakrishna Vivekananda Devalaya was established in Gudumeyapet, Bangalore, on 29 November 1923 by Ms Josephine MacLeod, the American disciple of Swami Vivekananda. The released convicts would visit this temple and spend time with the swami, participate in bhajans and other spiritual activities, and improve themselves. Swami Somananda embodied in his life the ideal of service by being the friend, guide, and consoler of a set of fallen people for whose welfare society cared very little. He did this task with untiring love for decades, and many among those he served abandoned their mistaken ways under his influence.



Swami Somananda

—Adapted from *A Spiritual Centre Blossoms: Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, First 100 years*

# A Unique Durga Puja

**Pritindra Krishna Bhattacharya**

**T**HERE is nothing more interesting than human nature with its inherent conceptual complexities. Some words instil fear in us while others fill us with instant hope and happiness. Words create certain images in our minds and influence us for better or for worse. This finds reflection in our actions, which are more often than not guided by our presumptions. We often tend to arrive at objective judgements and adopt discriminating attitudes towards people on the basis of subjective conceptions.

The words 'jail', 'prison', 'convict', and 'criminal' evoke fear and revulsion. To most of us prisons are places for criminals and convicts. But do all people behind bars deserve to be treated as real criminals? Not always. Many of them are victims of circumstances; still others go to jail fighting for a just cause. Of course, there are also real culprits and miscreants who perhaps deserve their terms fully.

During the days of the British Raj, thousands of Indians who fought for freedom were convicted, given severe sentences, and thrown into prison. Many great sons and daughters of India had to undergo brutal torture at the hands of the British masters inside impregnable jails. These prisoners were in fact regarded by their own countrymen with utmost veneration, as patriots and martyrs.

Once a person has served time in prison he or she is stigmatized for life. This black mark acts as an impediment to leading a normal life in future. The treatment, the circumstances and environment, the neglect, and at times torture can leave even hardened convicts totally shattered. Political prisoners, though not in this category, have also been known to suffer mental derangement due to the psycho-

logical and physical torture meted out to them.

A sympathetic word or the slightest show of concern and empathy can at times bring about a sea change in the lot of the hapless and the humiliated. The attributes of love, compassion, grace, and sympathy work wonders in providing hope and assurance. Rare are persons possessing these attributes. Rarer still are those ready to make these available unconditionally and unreservedly. This was no less true during the freedom movement in pre-independent India.

I had the good fortune of knowing intimately one such remarkable personality, an embodiment of love and compassion. He endeared himself to one and all, showered love and affection on people of all strata—completely overlooking their identity—and took all care to transport them to a special sphere of peace and happiness. He was a simple but highly spiritual soul, a sadhu of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Gadadharananda. A disciple of Swami Shivananda, and initiated into sannyasa by him in 1932, Swami Gadadharananda was head of the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Dinajpur (now in Bangladesh), from 1934 to 1947.

During his stay in Dinajpur, the bright, young, and spirited Gadai Maharaj (as we used to call Swami Gadadharananda) was involved deeply in various social and humanitarian activities apart from his own intense spiritual practices—japa, dhyana, puja, bhajan, and scriptural readings. He had absolute and unshakable faith in inherent human goodness and nurtured a positive outlook. He never looked into the dark side of anyone or found fault with anybody even if they happened to have blots on their character; nor did he look down upon anyone because of their shortcomings. His method of reform was through inspiring words and affection. He would say, 'One might have committed some mistakes, but why should he not come to a sadhu for solace?' He

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was of the opinion that a sadhu should always feel the miseries and sufferings of others as his own. To him, having been a criminal once was not necessarily the same as being a criminal always, or being untouchable for that reason. He followed Sri Sarada Devi's gospel, 'I am the mother of the wicked, as I am the mother of the virtuous' to the letter.

Following this philosophy, Gadai Maharaj used to visit the Dinajpur jail twice a week as a matter of routine. He would hold religious classes on the jail premises and interact with the inmates of all backgrounds. He would greet them with a namaskar and embrace them, all the while sporting his divine smile, and would enquire about their welfare. The genuineness of his concern and love touched the prisoners instantly. His magnanimity and broad heart shone through all his actions. Gadai Maharaj used to say, 'My heart bleeds for the poor, the unhappy, and the unfortunate who are spending a grueling time in inhuman conditions inside the jail. I always pray to Thakur and Ma for their solace and betterment.' We learnt from him that in course of his discussions with the prisoners, particularly the hard-core criminals, he would stress that they cultivate the habit of reading the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi regularly. He appealed to them to forget their past, forgive those who might have wronged them, and try to become good and useful members of society after being released from jail instead of getting involved in crime again. He also encouraged them to pray to God with all sincerity to relieve them of their suffering. Gadai Maharaj was especially sensitive to the feelings of prisoners awaiting the gallows.

We heard from the jailer that the convicts would wait for Gadai Maharaj with eager anticipation on the days of his visit. They would say, 'We like Gadai Maharaj very much. This Maharaj loves us truly and never ignores us. That is why we also love and respect him. We like to hear the stories of Ramakrishna from him. This should continue.' The convicts did not care to listen to any other sermon from anybody else. The political prisoners were also very close to Gadai Maharaj. They were encouraged by

him to fulfil their vow of attaining freedom. They found his way of discussing things and approach to problems to be different from the usual, based as they were on the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. As the jail authorities, including the jailor, became devoted to Maharaj, no one looked upon such discussions as being suspicious. Gadai Maharaj encouraged many prisoners to read the Bhagavadgita and the *Devi Mahatmayam* regularly, stressing the importance of these texts in gaining mental strength or achieving anything big and great.

In the year 1942 the Dinajpur jail witnessed an unprecedented event. Gadai Maharaj inspired the prisoners, especially the political detainees, to perform Durga Puja inside the jail. Permission was duly granted by the authorities. Nityakrishna Bhattacharya, a school student and one of the youngest of the political prisoners, was assigned the pious duty of performing the puja, while a very senior member became the *tantra-dharaka* (the director). Gadai Maharaj personally tutored Nityakrishna in the details of the puja. A beautiful cardboard image was prepared in the jail itself by Nityakrishna and a few other convicts, under Maharaj's close supervision. The celebration was a great success and provided a happy meeting ground for the inmates as well as the jail staff. This helped create an atmosphere of understanding and fellow-feeling. A few people from outside the jail premises also participated in this unique festival, which was possibly the first of its kind inside a prison in British times. This was indeed a great morale booster for all the participants, and brought a smile to the hundreds of imprisoned faces. Needless to say, Gadai Maharaj was the spirit behind this historic event, which was cherished by all who were associated with it.

This was the way Gadai Maharaj worked to inculcate higher values and a positive outlook. Though a God-intoxicated man, he dedicated his life to the cause of the suffering, the humiliated, the poor, and the neglected, following the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda. Such enlightened souls are what we need for a better future.





# Lived Spirituality: Three Inspirations from Business

Dr S K Chakraborty

IN this article, we shall revisit three of the conversations I recorded during my encounters with many executives across the country. They are reproduced below, with minimal editing. The names and organizational identities of the executives have not been disclosed. These intimate dialogues were held during the years 1999–2005. They stand out as sacred sagas amidst secular travails. The trio demonstrates that ‘sacred or spiritual rationality’ and ‘secular or mundane rationality’ are altogether different planes of consciousness. The true art of life lies in governing the latter by the former. This is what they offer us as the key teachings from the *bharatiya* ethos.

## CEO of an Entertainment-industry Firm

My grandfather was a painter. In those days this vocation meant a hand-to-mouth existence. So two of his sons were sent to Japan (one was my father), and another to Egypt, to fend for themselves. I did my BSc (Honours), followed by an MBA from one of the earlier IIMs (Indian Institute of Management). ... We are Jain; but my father’s personal ideal and idol was *maryada purushottama* Sri Rama. And yet our home had no image. Under his direct tutelage, I began to understand that Sri Rama was perhaps an appropriate leadership model for the *satya yuga*, while Sri Krishna was so for the *kali yuga*. Thereafter I got in touch with the thoughts of Ramana Maharshi and Christ. All this seemed to push me towards spirituality.

I was involved in a turnaround case. Such cases

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are inherently more complex and demanding than normal ongoing companies. So I began to study more and more spiritual literature. It was becoming clear to me that I have an innermost Being which transcends the hectic turmoil of body-mind-thought. I was getting convinced about the need to access this pure consciousness which is happiness itself. I started meditating twice a day. At the same time, I became a little confused. Often I felt tempted to retire and devote all my time to such pursuits. Somehow, during the last three or four years I had mentally decided to attain moksha in this very life.

At this stage came this new proposal to pilot another turnaround. I had then just got hold of the Bhagavadgita. There I hit upon the right perspective for my immediate dilemma. This perspective I did not get elsewhere. This book held out the full agenda of human life. So I accepted the fresh challenge, and resolved not to get stressed. The Gita has helped me to sustain my tempo for corporate life without losing sight of the goal of moksha. ...

The Gita helped me to realize that most of my life and work problems, including stress, were springing from personal ego. With the help of insights from the Gita, I am able to dis-identify myself more and more from egocentric tensions arising from any cause. ... I was also able to realize from this book that one of the biggest causes of unethical behaviour, as well as stress, is fear of failure. Besides, if one is focussed all the time on success, the capacity for risk-taking also declines. ...

Prayer or *prarthana* has been an unfailing prop in managing my personal effectiveness. ...

To be born in *bharatavarsha*, India, has been a great good fortune for me.

### **Executive Director of an Oil-refining and Marketing Company**

Today, the core of my existence is yoked to a kind of deep spiritual Being. All decisions, major or minor, emanate from this core. Sometimes it is a conscious process, but often it is natural. This core sums up my life and its purpose. All decisions are taken there for me. The individual 'I' does not decide anything.

My known spiritual journey began on 20 June 1996, when I attended a three-day workshop on 'Management by Human Values' organized specifically for the top managers of our company. It was held at the Management Centre for Human Values, Indian Institute of Management, Kolkata. The moment I filled in the questionnaire sent to us before attending the workshop, I became aware of my own spiritual and moral dimensions.

I was more of a challenger and investigator than a believer. I did manage to test the patience of the facilitator, and on four occasions got seriously counter-challenged in return. I did go through the experiential process in the workshop. On occasions they touched me at a deeper level; and I became surprised and bewildered at the intensity of my own absorption in and response to these initial experiences.

A couple of months later the Quality Mind Process (QMP) became part of me. Soon its duration started reaching 30–40 minutes in the early mornings. I felt more clear-headed. I felt immense energy at my command to fulfil challenging assignments, and ask for more. My temperament in the workplace became more gentle and responsive. ... We were a cosy and highly effective work team.

I had also recently visited the Sri Siddhi Vinayak Temple of Mumbai with a colleague. The visit to the temple created a strong impression on my mind, and I began visiting the temple more frequently. My wife would accompany me almost every time, and the children too would join often. ... I submitted myself to the grace and service of my lord Sri Siddhi Vinayak.

Meanwhile, my daily QMP continued. Its du-

ration became one hour, as I could wake up at 4.30 a.m. I got deeply interested in some books by Sri Aurobindo. I added them to the one given in the workshop. Apart from *Living Within*, I read *Looking from Within* and *Growing Within*. I read the Gita many times—initially with some reservations and a large number of questions, but later with increasing understanding and deepening fascination. Each verse was meaningful, complete, and a fundamental truth in itself.

My meditation continues through all my travels. So does my quest to reach, meet, and unify with the Divine. I have in my heart accepted Swami Vivekananda as my guru, and have great reverence for Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Ma—his guru and *guruma*.

### **General Manager of a Thermal Power Plant**

I see my life in three phases. In the first phase, as a student, things were relatively under my control. Then too some stress was felt; but that was due to the hard work required for better results. Even at that time, to concentrate better and to combat tension, I used to repeat God's name and visit temples with like-minded friends. We used to sit there in silence for a while.

In the second phase, at the start of my professional career, anxiety and stress sprang from the pressure of tasks assigned to me by my superiors. This meant spending extra working hours to master the job. Here japa proved very helpful. Reading good quality fiction literature also was a healthy tension dissipator. I would also sometimes share my difficulties with a few elders outside the office. They would listen to me and suggest some tips. One good method I practised was invoking the Gayatri mantra.

As I grew older and climbed up the organizational ladder, I entered into the third phase. I faced the internal and external systems of the corporate world, which are steeped in corruption, greed, and jealousy. I had to live with them, yet ensure that I did not lose my own human values. The other major problem was that I was now neglecting my family—old father, young children, wife, and others.

So, I decided to draw up a self-regulating charter: not to initiate anything unethical from my side, regular prayers in the morning (20 min) and before sleeping (5–7 min), and so on. I also started practising written japa of *rama-nama* on a specially reserved pad. My family members have been cooperating positively in such efforts.

However, the turning point was attending the first in-house ‘Human Values Workshop’ in 1999. I then saw vividly that ‘silence in solitude’ is essential for introspection. This is the key to conquer stress.

After attending the advanced modules of the workshop especially designed for those in leadership roles, I was convinced that *svarat samrat bhavati* (the master of oneself becomes master of everything); this is the one way to live well and without stress. I also now subscribe to the *nishkama karma* (unattached work) philosophy of the Gita. I try to imprint this upon my brain at the end of my prayers. Now I clearly realize that when one achieves success, one should be ready to take failures and brickbats in one’s stride too. Listening to *bhakti sangit* (devotional music) at home also leaves positive residues in the subconscious. A combination of such methods, coupled with the sincere belief that God extends his support for correct actions, makes me feel more secure and gives me peaceful sleep.

Moreover, nowadays I prefer reading spiritual literature rather than fiction. I bring my family too into discussions. They compare my actual conduct against the sacred guidelines. With the grace of God, this helps us to evolve together bit by bit.

## Conclusion

The following conclusions might be highlighted from the above three narratives.


The spiritual approach in organizations presupposes the prevalence of a continuous, living tradition in the wider social matrix. This is borne out unmistakably by all the three instances above. In the absence of such an overarching ambience, all superficial or intellectual attempts to incorporate spirituality in secular organizations will tend to be counterfeit. It will be wiser for cultures which lack

such ambience to proceed from the roots, with humility, to learn from those who treasure all the precious details and authentic experiences.

The Gita is one common anchor for all the three leaders. This gives the lie to the allegation by some renowned intellectuals, Indian and Western, that the Gita incites violence. Violence might be a strong emotion ruling the minds of such smart critics themselves! For people see what they are predisposed to or want to see in someone or something. Demolition or denunciation is their a priori intention. Yet, millions of common folk in India, even today, are devoted to the struggle of life on the basis of the timeless spiritual principles the Gita embodies.

Yoga-Vedanta, or Hindu psycho-philosophy, has been rendered practical through concrete processes like deep breathing, silent japa, written japa, prayer, and meditation. This ensemble is clearly demonstrated by the self-imposed discipline in the daily routine of all the individuals cited above. Faith and sincerity are their hallmarks. Positive proof follows their ardent faith.

Prevention or reduction of stress, equanimity of mind in success or failure, clear thinking, strength to take difficult decisions, ego reduction, heightened ethicality, better credibility among team members, trust in God or a higher Consciousness or Intelligence—these are the common positive fruits reaped by all of them. But these fruits flow as derivatives from the primary motives for spirituality, like attaining moksha, or becoming an agent or instrument in the hands of the Divine.

All the three individuals tend towards being ‘yogis’. That is, in their own ways, each one is striving to be in yoga with the Divine Consciousness—a sort of plugging into a charger socket. Among them they illustrate the practicality of *yogah karmasu kaushalam* (yoga is adeptness in work), *tasmad yogi bhavarjuna* (therefore, O Arjuna, be a yogi), and *tasmat sarveshu kaleshu mamananusmara yuddhya cha* (therefore, remembering Me at all times, fight)—the eternal verities of the Gita (2.50, 6.4.6, 8.7). What a contrast between such true yoga of inner realization, and the phoney ‘yoga’ of laboratory research! 

# ***Science and Spirituality: Personal Reflections***

**Prof. C N R Rao**

SCIENCE and spirituality have many common attributes. Scientists seek to understand the universe: the matter, the forces, and the phenomena governing it. In their quest for understanding and desire to attain the highest form of knowledge, scientists also seek perfection. Spirituality is no different. Those who are on the spiritual path seek perfection and a complete knowledge of the ultimate reality. Both science and spirituality seek to understand the secret of life and being. A good scientist has to keep climbing the limitless ladder of excellence, since there is no real end to the pursuit of or to the effort to attain perfection, for no one ever reaches the perfect state. A seeker of spirituality similarly must climb the limitless ladder of excellence, because humans can never reach the state of perfection. In defining the perfect one, I can only think of a God who is omniscient and omnipresent, a God who is expansive, kind, and forgiving. We are all the children of the same God, possessing the same atoms created at the beginning of the universe. We are his images. According to Madhvacharya, one of India's religious seers and philosophers, 'This world is the only reality, and it is not a myth. He (God) is supreme, and we are all his images. How good the image is depends on one's qualities.'

Albert Einstein said that without a personal philosophy and a religious bent of mind, it is impossible to live. Only insecure and shallow persons question this. In this context, I find it important to be honest in expressing one's inner feelings. Many people have asked me, 'Do you believe in God?' I

am not shy to say that I believe in God. I do not however, believe in superstitions or omens. I do not have my horoscope (neither did my father), but I enjoy going to temples. In fact, I visit the sacred shrines of all religions. I have spent hours in quiet contemplation in many temples of India and in St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. I have prayed at the Holy Wall and the shrine above it in Jerusalem.

The uncertainties in this world, the way things happen and the way nature works, demand a certain attitude. I think there are things which are beyond simple rationale. Everything cannot be explained away in simplistic terms. This is true of love, beauty, and music. We should have the humility to say that we do not understand everything. Such humility is essential of true scholars. It is actually not necessary to be able to explain every emotion and aesthetic experience.

I believe in a God who is all-powerful. His omnipotence and omnipresence make it impossible to describe him in one particular way. For this reason, people worship him in different forms. I am not surprised by this. Maybe that is why we have so many gods and goddesses in India. Each time we probably worship one aspect of God. But one thing is definite. It is essential to pray in order to have a definite way of life, to have guidelines for ourselves, and to live harmoniously in this world. In this context the theory of karma is useful; and believing in the next life is helpful to be a good person in this life.

My faith in God has helped me in all my endeavours. Where does a person like me get the moral courage to face the world with all its problems? How is it that I try to accomplish and prac-

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tise science at the highest possible level, working under conditions which are not necessarily the best and in an atmosphere which may not be the most conducive? Does this require some help? Yes. I believe that the moral courage that I need to face various problems in my life has been the gift of God. There are many things that bother us all—for example, when family problems become difficult, when we are left out, when we are insulted, when our own colleagues pull us down, when we do not get necessary encouragement, and when our own students or younger people behave badly. These problems are common everywhere, but particularly so in India. How do we get the forbearance to keep on smiling? How do we keep our aim high and retain our ideals in spite of everything else that pulls us down? This can be done only with the help of God almighty.

Genuine scientists as well as seekers of spirituality have to be single-minded. In fact, single-mindedness or perseverance is the single most important quality for a scientist to accomplish something worthwhile in India. This reminds me of a story that my mother, who was also my first teacher, used to tell me. She used to say that Saraswati, the goddess of learning, is extremely dif-

ficult to please, while it is much easier to please Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. If you pray to her a little, Lakshmi will bless you with some money. However, it is very difficult to get the blessings of Saraswati. In order to attain knowledge and wisdom, one has to surrender to her absolutely. It is only then that Saraswati may look at you. If one has to become a great scholar or research worker, complete surrender to Saraswati is an essential prerequisite. When eventually Saraswati blesses one, all other rewards will also come to the person. I think it is the lack of this single-mindedness that has affected the state of development of science and scholarship in this country. It is best to gain everything in life through knowledge.

However single-minded one might be, one cannot help getting doubts about one's chosen path. Doubts about oneself and about various other matters arising from everyday life can be unnerving and debilitating. When such things happen, I remember the Bhagavadgita and what Mahatma Gandhi said about it: 'When disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon I turn to the Bhagavadgita, and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile.'



## Mysticism for All

When we speak about mystical experience, we have an idea about something far away, meant for an ascetic somewhere. This is absolutely wrong! Anybody, from any walk of life, can have a mystical experience because the profound philosophy of Vedanta tells us that the divine spark is in every one of us. We can come in touch with it, manifest it, and in the light of that truth we can deal with other people in a happy way. Therefore a mystical experience must walk hand-in-hand with work and with the human relationships we establish. Swami Vivekananda calls this practical Vedanta. What was the privilege of a few in the past will become the privilege of everyone in society when people understand it correctly. This is the truth, but unfortunately we neglect it. In the future we should put a stop to this sort of carelessness.

When I work in society, I can work from my ego and create friction with others, or I can manifest a little of my divine nature and feel oneness with others. The capacity for teamwork develops there. This is real mystical growth and development and the type of human development we need. In the Gita there is a very precious word: *rajarshi*—*raja* and *rishi* in one. In all walks of life we find men of responsibility and authority. But can they be spiritual at the same time? If they manifest the divine within, they will become a *rajarshi*. When your hands wield power, you're a *raja*. When your hands wield power for the good of all, you become a *rishi*. This combination is what we need to instil in our administration, our management and all aspects of our human relations.

—Swami Ranganathananda, in *The Mind of the Guru*

# Truth Alone Triumphs

Justice Palok Basu

THE Bhagavata has eloquently articulated how a seeker of truth becomes his or her own guru: 'Generally speaking, persons endowed with the capacity to investigate the truth of things lift themselves from the evils of instinctive life by their own discriminative power. One's guru is one-self, especially for human beings, for they are able to raise their lives to a cultural level through observation and inference.' Sri Ramakrishna has pointed out that 'the world contains a mixture of truth and untruth' and that humans have the capacity to discriminate between the two: 'If one is aware of night, one is also aware of day. If one is aware of knowledge, one is also aware of ignorance.' But perfect adherence to truth is by no means easy. That is why Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Truthfulness alone is the spiritual discipline in the Kaliyuga.'

When we try our best to side with truth in our mundane existence, we often come across startling examples of how forces—which, in the absence of any other suitable expression, have to be identified as spiritual—create circumstances to establish truth and secure its triumph. In my legal career spanning over forty-five years—as advocate, as high court judge, and as president of the State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (SCDRC), UP—I have been witness to many such situations. I wish to share three of these incidents.

Few lawyers would have been witness to the situation that cropped up in a criminal case involving three brothers, H, R, and C. They had been charged with the murder of Bangali, a notorious hoodlum, when the latter visited their neighbourhood one morning. The brother-in-law of the accused contacted me to argue the bail plea for all

three in the high court and thereafter to conduct the trial also. It had been alleged in the first information report (FIR) that R and C had caught hold of the victim while H stabbed him with a *gupti* (a weapon with a long and rounded blade) in the chest, killing him on the spot. The high court allowed bail for R and C, but H was refused bail as he was allegedly the main killer. The defendants' brother-in-law then decided to have another lawyer conduct the trial. The trial judge relied upon eyewitness accounts, rejected the denial defence of the accused, and awarded the death sentence to H and life imprisonment to R and C.

At this point I was again requested to take up the case and have the appeal conducted in the high court. It was conveyed to me that H was in fact not even present at the scene of the crime; R and C had seen the victim near their house, R had gone and fetched the *gupti* from their house while C lay in wait. Thereafter C caught hold of the victim and R pierced the *gupti* into his chest. I was deeply perturbed by the fact that H had been ordered to be hanged though, from the facts that I had, he did not even participate in the act of murder. (It was of course another matter that all the three accused denied their involvement.) I was also praying vigorously that an innocent should not die at the hands of law on the fake statement of so-called eyewitnesses as I argued the case threadbare before the bench of Justices S D Khare and Yashodanandan, for two full days.

Sri B N Katju, son of the legendary Dr K N Katju, was the government advocate defending the state of UP against this appeal. As is usual, he had been briefed about the case by the investigating officer. When Sri Katju was called upon to reply to my arguments, he made a most extraordinary statement before the bench—that the investigat-

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Justice Palok Basu is former Judge, Allahabad High Court, and former President, State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission, Uttar Pradesh.

ing officer had confided to him that it was R and not H who actually killed the victim. At this unprecedented turn of events, the bench retired to the chambers. The next day the bench sought the assistance of the illustrious advocate general Sri K L Mishra, as the situation had no precedent. Sri Mishra, astute lawyer that he was, suggested that the investigating officer's statement to the government advocate was totally extra-judicial (as his official report which was backed by the witnesses was diametrically opposite) and that in order to find out the truth, the court might examine the remaining eyewitnesses whose statements had not been recorded by the trial court. The bench agreed to this advice and summoned the remaining eyewitnesses. But none of them refuted the FIR version that H was the actual stabber while R and C had only caught hold of the victim.

So the additional material seemed only to confirm H's guilt. But I feel almost certain that the developments in court led the bench to doubt the veracity of the eyewitness accounts. This was probably the reason why H's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and R and C were each handed out five years' rigorous imprisonment. Sri B N Katju's honesty and courage had no parallel! Interestingly, on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's birth centenary the sentences of many convicts were remitted; H too was a beneficiary and came out of jail after serving about six years.

I strongly feel that those who live truthfully are invariably backed up by an invisible force. During my tenure as judge, I was surprised on several occasions to see how truth stood unearthed when the dictates of one's conscience were followed. A big metal manufacturer had a dispute with the State Electricity Board, initially about the electricity charges it was asked to pay, and, subsequently on the claim of interest on the said dues. Three earlier petitions of the plaintiff had gone to the Supreme Court. The one before the bench comprising Justice D C Shrivastava and me related to the claim of interest amounting to nearly 360 million rupees.

Sri K Venugopal, a reputed senior advocate, ar-

gued that since the main demand had been stayed by the Supreme Court, the payment of interest on that amount could not be enforced as long as that stay was in force. The interim stay order of the Supreme Court was quoted thus in paragraph ten of the petition: 'Proceedings on demand shall remain stayed.' Somehow I did not feel very happy about this particular reference. I had the feeling that, given the context, the above phrase might not be complete in itself or might not actually be referable to the 'recovery proceedings.' So the bench decided to enquire about the basis of the above averment.


Sri Venugopal filed a certified copy of the interim order of the Supreme Court that was handed over to him by an official of the company. After examining the copy, the bench requested Sri Venugopal to read aloud the order. It read: '... proceedings on *remand* shall remain stayed ...' (emphasis added). There was an obvious typing mischief! While paragraph ten of the petition read *demand*, the certified copy of the order actually spoke of *remand*. The Supreme Court had only stayed the 'proceedings on remand' as directed by the high court at some earlier stage in the litigation. It had not stayed the recovery proceedings so as to stop the running up of interest on the amount demanded. Sri Venugopal sought adjournment to look into the matter for himself, as he had no knowledge of the incorrect averment in paragraph ten. Next day, the bench was informed that Sri Venugopal had left for Delhi the previous evening to attend to some very urgent matters pending before the Supreme Court. Sri Venugopal has the reputation of being a conscientious lawyer. He did not pursue this case any further. The bench disposed of the petition by holding that the company was eligible for a relief of only 40 million rupees on the basis of some other stay orders, but was liable to pay the remaining 320 million. Both parties appealed to the Supreme Court, which only upheld the previous judgment. I still remain amazed at my decision to enquire about the basis of the statement made in paragraph ten of the petition; I am still not sure what exactly prompted me to do so. I can only see it as an instance of divine

grace in the cause of justice.

As president of SCDRC, I was also witness to several cases where the cause of justice appeared to me to be facilitated by an unusual play of circumstances. Let me cite an instance. A compensation claim of Rs 1.8 million for alleged medical negligence and deficiency of service against three doctors was pending before the Commission for a long time. A young woman who had undergone a caesarean delivery suffered severe brain damage during the course of surgery. The plaintiff claimed that this was due to negligence on the part of the obstetricians and anaesthetist while the defendants were of the opinion that this was a direct result of eclampsia, a complication of the pregnancy itself. The judgment records: 'A youthful, fresh, and charming woman, just about to embrace the best gift of nature, motherhood, has, after delivering the child, turned into practically a lump of flesh. How and why has this happened is the only issue involved in this complaint. Is it due to medical negligence of the opposite parties who have admittedly treated the complainant, some of whom allegedly monitored the days of her attaining motherhood while all of whom actively participated in the process of delivery of the child? Or is the present pathetic condition of the complainant due to "pre-eclampsia and then eclampsia" emanating from the process of her motherhood itself?' On examining the evidence and hearing the arguments presented by the counsel for both parties, the bench felt that the issues involved were too technical and both counsel were finding it difficult to correctly interpret the evidence.

The next logical thing to do in this case was to seek expert advice. But such initiative on the part of the Commission could be seen as unnecessary activism, given the fact that such a step is still not common in UP. Moreover, even expert opinion could be equivocal or get vitiated by non-medical concerns. So, we felt it to be a godsend when the counsel for both parties themselves suggested that the Commission seek expert opinion and that they be accorded the right to cross-examine the experts. The heads of the departments of neurology and gynaecology of the Lucknow Medical College were requested to appear as experts. They studied the medical evidence, and their opinion pointed unambiguously to it being a case of medical negligence and deficiency of service. Finally, in a judgement dictated in open court, the two doctors who operated upon the patient and the anaesthetist who attended upon her were each directed to pay a sum of Rs 0.3 million to the complainant. The matter is presently pending before the National Commission.

In my opinion the decision by both counsel to seek expert opinion was both unusual and crucial to settling the issue. I still do not know what prompted them to do so. This, along with the unambiguous opinion of the experts, facilitated the delivery of justice.

Over forty-five years of legal practice have convinced me that the gains of following honest ways are permanent. More important, in following this path a conscious feeling develops that spirituality alone can and will sustain values, the truth, and the right, a feeling that gradually transforms into firm faith and unshakeable belief. 

**The first thing needed to be spiritual is truthfulness.**

Never forsake truth, even for the sake of your life. God is truth itself; hence he is at the command of one who is devoted to truth. Spirituality is impossible for him who does not cherish truthfulness in thought, word, and deed; without this, all attempt is in vain. So, first of all try to be unflinchingly truthful with all heart and soul. Truth is ever victorious in all times—past, present, and future.

Many know theoretically much of what spirituality

is; but, alas, how few are there who put their knowledge into actual practice. The achievement will be only his who would follow up truth. We hear many say that it is impossible to be truthful in business, but I do not believe it. Where truth reigns, there the Lord himself abides. If the man of business carefully enshrines truth in his house, he will be looked upon as the greatest of all virtuous men and his business is destined to thrive.

—Swami Premananda



# Learning to Serve

Juin Mitra

**H**E built this hut himself at night. Its walls are made of bed sheets, and the floor of his own blanket. No roof is needed, for the hut is itself situated on the upper floor of this small two-storied residential school. The entrance to this hut is guarded by his own rosary. Chhotu's self-defence is complete. No ghost could possibly have the courage to cross his *lakshman rekha*. He tells his beads regularly before going to bed at night and therein lies his strength.

But why does he need all this 'protection'? Because he is the only person who is sleeping upstairs and it's lonely up there. And why can't he sleep on the ground floor as the others do? Well, it's a bit crowded below and Chhotu feels that if he moved upstairs it would be just a little more comfortable for others. After all, at twelve, he is big enough to sleep alone, and he knows what to do to keep scary creatures away. Chhotu is always ready to make room for others, to share his favourite tiffin with others, keeping the less-favourite portions for himself. The tiffin itself is hardly special—bread, *sattu* (fried grain or gram), and occasionally fruits. But even this he likes to share, not only with his school friends but also with friends and relations made on the streets. Those whom we take for mere acquaintances are relatives to him—grandma or grandpa. When the school results are out and he is promoted to higher classes he offers pranams to these God-gifted relatives and receives their truest blessings. Who taught him to do this?

It is 5.30 in the morning. Someone quietly switches on the light. It is Tumpa. She is sixteen. But this has been her routine for nearly four years now. She is always first to get up in the morning.

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Ms Juin Mitra is associated with SOUL, an institution for socio-economically deprived children based in Kolkata.

Nobody needs to call her. Last year she had Sanskrit among the subjects in her syllabus. She started reading the Gita on her own, and got the other senior inmates of the home to recite at least one chapter with her every morning.

Is this a hostel, or a home, or an ashrama? The inmates would probably not know; and the name is the least important of all issues for the small number of inmates. The earnings of a small group of active members and a few well-wishers who are either service-holders or retired persons help meet the financial liabilities. The aim is to help a few needy children carry on their studies by providing for their daily needs—food, lodging, clothing, study material, treatment, and also entertainment. Is it possible for petty service-holders to manage this with the meagre funds they are able to lay aside from their monthly incomes? Such questions are often raised by sceptics. But Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's blessings are always upon those who act in the name of the Lord; she has granted the assurance that such people will never face scarcity of regular food and clothing. Probably, in the present hard times, her blessings have been extended to the medical field too. By God's grace, all the children keep good health.

The children are dedicated to the Lord, and he has taken the responsibility of caring for and protecting them. We feel this to be literally true. As the care-givers have to attend to their office work, the children are often left to themselves during the day. Though they are twelve to sixteen years old now, they were much younger when the home was started seven years ago. They have their routine of study and have developed a habit of disciplined reading; but naughtiness is also quite natural to them. There are also times when they accidentally walk into dangerous zones trying to be just a bit more helpful. Thus it was divine grace that saved

Chhotu from being electrocuted when he decided to clean the electric switches with soap and water. Keeping things clean fascinates these children, and in their enthusiasm they often manage to break panes and glass articles—again none has been hurt till now, though they came pretty close to that.

Guests are always welcome to come and break the monotony of the syllabus-oriented academic life. If you pay them a visit, the children would be very glad. They have gone on excursions to different places—to Delhi to see the capital, to Agra for the Taj Mahal, to Mathura and Vrindaban, the birthplace and playground of Sri Krishna, and to Chandipur to experience the sea. Still, the humdrum daily routine and the regular tests at school make life monotonous and boring. So guests are like fresh air, and the children love to make the best use of them. Sanjib has had a passion for cooking right from the time he was eleven, and now his companions look upon him as an expert cook. Not

only will he treat guests to special dishes, you can also rely on him to gladly manage the entire kitchen if the elders are sick or are caught up with some unexpected work.

They love to play, to draw, to sing, to see movies, and to attend functions as all children do. But what makes them that little bit special is the fact that they joyously do all sorts of household work in the spirit of service to God. They are almost perfect in nursing their fellow mates in times of sickness; they felt happy to donate all the money kept aside for the purchase of their festive clothes for the treatment of a child suffering from tuberculosis of the bone; and, by the grace of God, they are fit to participate in distribution of food, garments, and medicines to the needy in times of flood.

They are the soul of SOUL—‘Service Oriented towards Upliftment of Living’. It is their prayer to their beloved Lord that their service be accepted as flowers at his lotus feet throughout their lives. ❧

## **Sri Ramakrishna's Influence**

**T**he first thing that impressed me was Sri Ramakrishna's life, which I read in his Gospel written by 'M'. His life itself is a message, a beacon to all seekers after truth—so simple, plain, and transparent. It was an open book. The clothes he wore, the words he spoke, and everything that he did made a deep impact on my mind.

Second, he constantly lived in superconsciousness, spiritual ecstasy, and the vision of God; but he brought down his mind to the ordinary level to talk to the common folk, answer their questions, and clear their doubts. He presented God not as an extra-cosmic being or as an unrealizable object behind the clouds but as an ever-present and indwelling spirit in every human being, however humble. Although he practised the rituals and ceremonies laid down by Hinduism in his early life for spiritual realization, he came to the realization that different religions lead to the same goal. His true message is of religious harmony, and that true spirituality is not Sunday sermon, Monday bhajan, or Friday namaz, although these may serve the purpose of purifying the mind.

Third, Ramakrishna expressed the abstract ideas of religion and philosophy, and the great truths of Vedanta, in

utterly simple language and homely imagery for the easy comprehension of the common person. He used parables, stories, and examples from everyday life. Many of his parables are drawn from real life and the scriptures with which people are familiar. His sayings are not those of a learned man but come from his personal experience. So his words are charged, and his utterances have the stamp of authority. He reminded every person of his or her own divinity and said, 'Tie the knowledge of Advaita in the corner of your cloth and then do whatever you like.' We find revealing and modern interpretations of profound spiritual truths with apt examples, fitting illustrations, interesting anecdotes, subtle humour, and a choice of words which touches the hearts of men, women, and children.

Fourth and last, his greatest and priceless gift to humankind is Vivekananda, the morning star of Indian independence, the harbinger of our national consciousness, the master's trumpet voice to power the minds of the youth for promotion of national integration and world peace. He was the first global being to take the giant step to interpret India to the West.

—Prof. I V Chalapati Rao, Hyderabad

# Musings of an Advaitin

Prof. B N Kaul

THE following observations are by a student practising the Advaita way of life. They are related to happenings in the valley of Kashmir in general and the Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Srinagar, in particular during the years 1989 to 2007.

It was August 1989. Srimat Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj, then President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, was scheduled to tour the valley early that month. The Srinagar ashrama was hosting and conducting the visit. Preparations were proceeding apace, and spiritual aspirants and devotees connected with the ashrama were eagerly awaiting Maharaj's presence. Right then, as if out of the blue, terror descended; bombs were thrown, bullets fired, and chaos and confusion reigned all over Srinagar. The local people were left bewildered.

Belur Math authorities were naturally concerned, and wanted Maharaj's visit to be cancelled. But the Srinagar ashrama, after carefully studying the situation, stuck to its earlier decision and requested Swami Bhuteshanandaji to continue with the planned programme. Swami Bhuteshanandaji also endorsed our decision and undertook the visit, despite contrary advice from several quarters. The visit proved to be a great success. To have the president of the Ramakrishna Order in the midst of devotees while an ambience of terror and confusion prevailed in the valley was remarkable. Swami Bhuteshanandaji addressed many gatherings, initiated devotees, and instilled hope and courage in the minds of people.

Soon it was time for the Navaratri celebrations. The observance went on in spite of the terror and

destruction unleashed all around by misguided youths. The atmosphere was so fearsome that people were scared to hear the sound of conches and the ringing of puja bells. The usual immersion ceremony of Mother Durga in the Vitasta (River Jhelum) was cancelled. Instead, the ceremony was conducted in the sylvan setting of the ashrama lawns. The devotional spirit triumphed and puja concluded peacefully. This was followed by Sri Sarada Devi's *tithi-puja* (birthday) celebrations.

The nights of 19 and 20 January 1990 proved to be turning points in the recent history of Kashmir. Throughout the valley, mosques suddenly became abuzz with public address systems blurting out anti-national, anti-minority, and anti-sanity propaganda, spewing venom and threatening the safety and honour of the saner and gentler sections of the population. A new culture of intolerance and hatred gripped the people's imagination. This soon became the worst period in the living memory of the people of the valley.

A mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits (Bhattas), the original inhabitants of Kashmir, ensued. Lakhs of them left the valley, seeking safer havens in other parts of the country. The ashrama, which used to teem with devotees and workers, turned desolate. The *tithi-pujas* of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna were observed with a much reduced participation. By March 1990, very few families and institutions of the Pandits remained in Srinagar, and the ashrama's service activities were virtually paralyzed. The few remaining inmates somehow managed the ashrama routine. It was the Advaitic spirit that now permeated the ashrama and inspired these inmates to adjust and conduct themselves in accordance with that ambience.

The days that followed were very uncertain and

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frightful; none knew their future or security. The houses of Pandits all around the ashrama were ransacked, looted, and burnt down. Shooting down one bird in a flock is enough to scare the rest away. The situation was similar here. Thousands and thousands of frightened people were leaving behind their hearths, homes, sweet memories, and the rich heritage of ancient Kashmiri culture, and heading towards unknown and uncertain places. It was only through the grace of the Divine that in this pall of gloom and darkness the Srinagar ashrama (popularly called Shivalaya Ashrama) could carry on the temple services and keep the lamp of devotion kindled in the midst of the rough and turbulent atmosphere. Devotees, friends, and the kith and kin of the ashrama inmates, now living in the free and relaxed settings of the plains, were urging the inmates to leave the valley and escape from the jaws of death, but Divine Providence and the Advaita spirit made us stay and carry on the day-to-day services. Medical and educational service activities had to be suspended, but the temple services continued.

In order to rally popular support and mobilize the masses against the nationalist spirit, the perpetrators of destruction and terror organized a huge march of vehicles loaded with thousands of supporters to Char-e-Sharif, a town in Budgam district immortalized by the sacred memory of the great Sufi sage Sheikh Nur-ud-Din Nurani, popularly known as Nunda Rishi. Nunda Rishi expounded and practised the Rishi school of thought, a beautiful and sweet blend of Sufi Islam and Advaita Shaiva thought. However, severe rain and snow aborted this march, and many participants lost their lives on the way. The misguided passion for *azadi* (freedom) which had gripped the innocent common masses suffered a severe blow, and the situation calmed down. The catholic and compassionate Advaitic face of Kashmiri Sufi culture emerged from the black clouds. This spirit of Advaita also injected new life and hope in the sagging morale of the few remaining ashrama inmates.

Killing of innocent and prominent people con-

tinued. Dozens of Pandits were killed in the vicinity of the Shivalaya Ashrama. Armed bands of young killers were roaming about freely, but they did not enter the ashrama premises.

The security agencies approached the ashrama management and offered security cover, but this was politely refused for fear of provoking terrorist ire. This resolve of the ashrama was appreciated by the local people; thus we became insulated from the terrorist rage.

In October 1992, another noteworthy incident took place. One of the inmates of the ashrama premises, who happened to be sleeping in the main hall, was suddenly awakened by a heavy thud. In the midnight darkness a masked young man, pistol in hand, approached this inmate's bed and ordered him to get up, refrain from putting the lights on, and follow his dictates *in toto*. The youth charged the inmate of being a security-force informer and wanted to search the ashrama for the wireless or related equipment that he thought was being used for this purpose. The inmate had by this time recovered from the state of shock and disbelief and regained his normal composure. It was the Advaitic approach permeating him that gave him back his self confidence, and he could follow the militant's dictates unhesitatingly.

On reaching the main door of the hall, the militant spotted a locked steel almirah and ordered that it be unlocked. Even as the inmate started searching for the keys to the almirah, the militant dropped his demand and wanted to search the temple instead. But astonishingly, this very command brought forth a complete change in the militant's demeanour; lament and regret seized him, and he started expressing his sorrow and regret at his strange decision to visit the ashrama at that unearthly hour. He put his pistol back in his jacket, sat down on a chair, and began to apologize and to curse himself.

The inmate, who was observing this strange drama being enacted in his presence, was soon able to sense the presence of another militant on the veranda outside, which put him in a state of greater anxiety and alertness; a few more militants could



well have been standing outside the building. All the same, he expressed his thanks and gratitude to the militant for his changed perception and offered him a cup of tea. This the militant refused. He then left the building with his companion; both of them jumped over the ashrama wall and disappeared into the darkness.

Whether the pistol was genuine or a mere toy, and whether the chances of death were real or imaginary, could not be ascertained; but the situation was soon normal, and the inmate went back to sleep, musing over the whole drama and the Advaitic spirit that inhered in it.

Years went rolling by, and by 1995–6 the situation had eased a little. Sri Amarnath *yatra* through the Srinagar route was resumed, and sadhus and guests undertaking this *yatra* started visiting the ashrama again. But the situation was still far from normal, and all the ashrama gates had to be closed by dusk. As a matter of fact, by dusk, all shops and establishments were routinely closed, and movement of people would also come to a standstill; the silence of the graveyard reigned.

One night, during the *yatra* season, there was a knock at the main gate of the ashrama. On opening the gate, we found an innocent-looking lady standing there all alone. Having had the *darshan* of Sri Amarnath, she had come down to Srinagar via Baltal. A kind and courteous autorickshaw driver had dropped her at the ashrama gate. The lady explained that she was from Kolkata and was close to our Sangha, and expressed her wish to spend the night at the ashrama. Her faith and devotion made us agree to her request. This strange, fearless *shrad-dha* provided a new perspective to our Advaitic perceptions, even in the midst of the contradictions that pervaded life in these parts in general.

Some days later a sadhu not previously known to us visited us at night. He gave us detailed information about the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission and its well-known sadhus. This generated trust in our minds, and we permitted him to stay in the ashrama for a few days. He would leave early in the morning and return by evening.

One day we found him returning during the day and exchanging signs with a very low-flying helicopter. When we questioned him about this, he revealed his identity as an Intelligence Bureau informer, and also his ways and means of collecting information about militants and their plans. He expressed his regrets for disguising his real identity. This unfortunate incident made us very cautious, and henceforth we had to become firm in refusing to allow even genuine and sincere sadhus to stay at the ashrama.

In 1995, the famous and most revered shrine of Hazrat Nur-ud-Din at Chari-e-Sharif was seized by militants. After several days of confrontation with the security forces, the militants consigned the shrine to the flames, thus reducing this most loved and popular place of worship to ashes. There was general resentment and anger, a feeling which remains deeply buried in the hearts of common Kashmiris. This incident alienated the people from the ways of terror and intolerance, and the militants lost whatever little sympathy they had among the masses. People began to redraw sustenance and hope from their pristine, catholic Sufi culture and Kashmiri identity. The incident and its aftermath also had an impact on the thinking of the minority population.

The inmates of the ashrama could also now feel the positive and hopeful wave sweeping the valley, though miscreants tried to provoke horror and de-

Dal Lake, Srinagar




spair by burning down the Maha-Ganesha Temple and the Maha-Kali Temple at Hari Parbat. Our hopes and constant prayers steeled our determination. Repair and renovations of the ashrama buildings were undertaken, and we began to think of the future once again. A recall of Swami Vivekananda's exhortations and expressions about Kashmir and its potential contribution to the Indian ethos and culture provided us a new orientation and inspired fresh thinking. Sadhus, devotees, and ashrama friends began to revisit the valley and its principal pilgrim centres; the main attractions being Sri Amarnath and Mother Kshir Bhavani.

The devotees of the Srinagar ashrama who had been displaced from the valley and were now settled in Jammu found a new haven in the Sri Ramakrishna Advaita Ashram, Udhowala, Jammu, managed by Srimat Shakti Chaitanya. Their constant pleadings and persuasions induced Shakti Chaitanyaji to think of the future of the Jammu ashrama and the general spiritual welfare of the devotees. He finally approached Belur Math and requested the authorities to take over the Jammu ashrama. The Srinagar ashrama, which had made a prior request for affiliation to the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, lost out because of the abnormal situation in the valley. Belur Math agreed to take over the property and management of the Jammu ashrama. So the Kashmir upheaval resulted in the emergence of the beautiful and well-planned Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Jammu.

Meanwhile, at the earnest request of the Srinagar ashrama devotees and admirers, the Samaj Sudhar Samiti Trust, which had Justice J N Bhat as president, transferred the Shivalaya land on which the Srinagar ashrama stands to the Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Srinagar, by executing a deed of transfer. The responsibility of owning, running, and managing the Shivalaya along with the ashrama and its activities now rested with the Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Srinagar.

Swami Smarananandaji, then general secretary of the Ramakrishna Order, visited the

ashrama in 2002. The assistant secretaries also visited the ashrama in 2003-04. Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, then vice president of the Order, visited the ashrama on his way to Sri Amarnath and addressed devotees. These visits and contacts rekindled our desire to get the Srinagar ashrama affiliated to Belur Math. Our constant and continuing requests finally bore fruit: Belur Math decided in principle to take over the Srinagar ashrama in June 2007.

Swami Vivekananda wished to have a centre of the Ramakrishna Order in Srinagar in 1897. It took a long hundred and ten years for his wish to reach fruition. It would be interesting to view the march of events through the timeless frame of Advaita and see how the vision or dream that arose in Swamiji's mind had to pass through the tumults of history. The Maharaja of Kashmir had decided to allot land for Swamiji to start a centre in Srinagar, but his decision was vetoed by the British resident. The following years saw the unleashing of terrible communal forces and the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent. The years 1989-90 witnessed the near total destruction of Hindu ethos and culture in the valley. This was followed by the re-emergence of the beautiful face of the ancient and composite culture of Kashmir. We are sure that with this resurgence, Jammu and Kashmir will play its natural role in the overall spiritual and cultural eminence of the great country that is Bharat. 

*Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Srinagar*



# The Thanjavur Story

Dr T Indira

**S**RI RAMAKRISHNA, with his unprecedented universal teachings based on his personal experience, has left behind an invaluable treasure, a spiritual legacy in the true sense of the term, hitherto unknown to humankind. It is a legacy meant not only for Indians, but for the entire human race.

## ***Sri Ramakrishna and Practical Vedanta***

Mahatma Gandhi has remarked, ‘The story of Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face.’ Sri Ramakrishna has brought religion and spirituality back from caves and forests, from rituals and ceremonies, to everyone’s day-to-day life. His reinterpretation of Vedantic dharma as a living and practical discipline enables spiritual aspirants to develop virtues, to discipline their lives, and to grow morally and spiritually—in short, Sri Ramakrishna humanizes spiritual life. According to his revelations, unless human beings become humane in their behaviour, they cannot manifest their divinity. With Sri Ramakrishna, spirituality has become ‘this-worldly’, not ‘other-worldly’. As a monk of the Ramakrishna Order once observed, he is indeed an embodiment of the realizations of various religious paths all over the world. This ‘practical touch’ has brought out a silent but concrete revolution in the spiritual world. Sri Ramakrishna’s methods for spiritualizing our day-to-day lives are rather simple.

Sri Ramakrishna showed to Swami Vivekananda that seeking God without—in suffering humanity—is as important as looking for him

within during deep meditation. Swami Vivekananda says, ‘When we come to the real, spiritual, universal concept, then, and then alone, religion will become real and living; it will come into our very nature, live in our every movement, penetrate every pore of our society, and be infinitely more a power for good than it has ever been before.’ Swami Vivekananda himself realized this after hearing a simple but profound message from Sri Ramakrishna in 1884. One day Sri Ramakrishna was commenting on the Vaishnava ideal of compassion. He remarked suddenly, ‘Who are you to show compassion? No, it cannot be. Not compassion for others, but rather the service of man, recognizing him to be a veritable manifestation of God.’ In this statement Swami Vivekananda discovered wonderful new light on making Vedanta practical and on the reconciliation of Vedanta with the ideal of devotion. And this light he made universally available.

Thus, the human being becomes, according to Swami Vivekananda, the manifested God. To be successful in life, to make our lives more meaningful, all our activities should be performed as God’s service; this will benefit humankind. Following in the footsteps of the Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Sarada Devi, aspirants must dedicate and re-dedicate themselves for serving their

*Sri Ramakrishna Temple, on the banks of the Vadavaru river*

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fellow human beings.

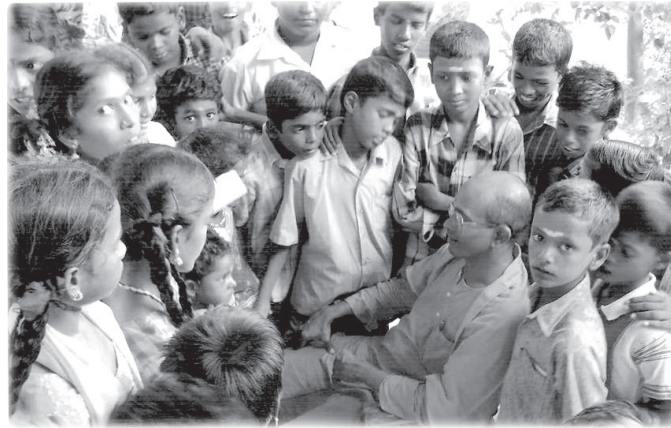
A natural question is: City-bred devotees and intelligentsia may comprehend the novel path shown by Sri Ramakrishna for the upliftment of the entire human race, but what will be the reaction of simple-minded, unostentatious villagers?

### **Practical Vedanta:**

#### **The Example of Thanjavur**

A small temple dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna was consecrated in 2002, near Thanjavur. The temple is situated in an interior village, on the banks of a river, and is surrounded by villages with people living below the poverty line. When we started the temple activities, we wondered how to impress upon the village folk the uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna—a god without the usual weapons or four hands and glittering ornaments that adorn gods and goddesses known to them—and Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, clad in her simple sari—of course with a rustic grandeur! The only weapon she has is the weapon of love!

However, the effect of these holy personalities on the villagers was instantaneous—incredibly so. The villagers, especially the women and children, say they feel Holy Mother's protective motherly wings over them. '*Yenga amma, yenga tay*, our mother, our mother' are their constant exclamations. The schoolboys and girls feel that Mother is slowly drawing them towards her. We could feel as well as discern their steady response to the practical side of Vedanta as enunciated by Sri Ramakrishna. It may not be possible for them to practise and follow all the regulations we try to teach them, but their efforts are laudable indeed. Obedience, love, sympathy, confidence, faith, and service-mindedness are some of the qualities they try to imbibe. Hailing from illiterate families with dishevelled hair—their transformation and positive response is really heartening. One can hear them make remarks like: 'Hey you, did you obey your elders? Did you help anyone in distress today? How many lies have you uttered today?' and the like. Following Mother's instructions, they keep things in their allotted



*The temple, top, and children with Swami Paravidyanandaji*

places—especially the brooms.

Once the caretaker of the temple was away in Chennai, and another devotee was requested to take charge of the temple activities. Owing perhaps to a communication gap, she did not turn up for evening *arati*. The temple gates were open. After waiting till 5.30, the boys and girls borrowed money from the gardener to purchase biscuits and camphor from a roadside shop; they also plucked flowers from the garden. They then offered the flowers and the biscuits to the portraits of the Holy Trio; also lighting the camphor, they waved it before the portraits. When I asked them later why they did not choose to go home, their immediate reply was, '*Amma* has asked us to do our duties without fail and we were happy to do it.' By her immaculate simple life of purity, piety, sincerity, and dedication, Holy Mother has not only made a deep impression on them but has made their lives happier.

#### **Holy Mother's Grace**

Sri Sarada Devi, who, despite all her hardships



looked after the well-being of devotees who flocked to her from various walks of life, is very dear to the village folks here. Her assurance, 'Whenever you are in trouble my child, remember, you have a mother', is a perennial source of inspiration to them. This is perhaps what lures them to the temple. The children may experience only pathetic scenes at home—with drunken fathers roughing them up and hapless mothers, they often have nothing to fall back upon. But there is a streak of lightning in the alarming darkness that often envelops them—Mother.

Overcoming the temptations of television, the children come regularly in the evenings, sing bhajans, and pray before her, at times with silent grief. Perhaps the unseen but deeply felt and refreshing assurance comforts them, who knows? That's what makes two or three girls (who have completed their post-graduation) take up a vow to remain single and to serve the wretched, the weak and storm-tossed. A brilliant, hard-working, and ambitious village boy was forced into labour after he had completed his higher secondary exams because of family circumstances. He came once or twice to the temple to pray for a better future. As if by a miracle, he was adopted by a well-to-do couple. His life, so far filled with despair, has turned out to be one



Taking prasad

with hope for a very bright future. He is in college now. He remarked in a voice choked with emotion, 'I came here for Mother's blessings only for a short while. She has showered her grace on me.'

An elderly lady received rice along with other affected families during the drought of 2003 in Tamil Nadu. The old lady would often come and pray in the temple. 'She is my only solace, my only God, my only relation,' she would say with tears in her eyes. She was often found to be not only praying but sweeping the hall and the portico. She breathed her last on Holy Mother's birthday in 2006!

The apostolic call of Swamiji, 'These are His manifold forms before thee, / Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God?' seems to inspire the youngsters here. They have determined to work for a more solid and peaceful tomorrow, for the ultimate establishment of universal brotherhood in a pathetically riot-torn world. They are very hopeful because they say they are Swamiji's *singa kuttigal*, lion cubs!

The schoolchildren utter with devotion the mantra '*Om namo bhagavate sri ramakrishnaya*'—not only in the temple but whenever they happen to go out alone. The ears of passers-by ring with reverberations of the joyous cries of the children, 'Jai Sri Ramakrishna'. Swami Vivekananda felt that the abstract Vedanta must be put in a form that even a child may grasp. He has done it by the grace of Sri Ramakrishna. Holy Mother's last words—'Nobody is a stranger, my dear; the world is yours'—will alone bring the world together, and will unify the people for a peaceful, comforting future. ❧



After Durga Puja, with gifts, left; and with nuns from Sarada Math, below



# *The Reassured Heart*

**Dr Marufi Khan**

## *Crossing Bridges*

**L**ITTLE Khuki, all of three-and-a-half years, thrust her face between her mother's knees and kept crying; her voice choked by the sobs. 'What did you do? Did you touch the pots and utensils there?' her mother said in an affectionate tone as she caressed her head.

'I had entered their kitchen to hide while playing hide-and-seek, and everybody—Auntie, Grandma, and all—started scolding me and then threw out the pots and pans from the kitchen onto the courtyard,' replied Khuki, even as her wail grew louder.

'You shouldn't cry for that. If you break their domestic rules, they have reason to be upset,' mother explained, drawing Khuki to her bosom.

'Let Dulal come, I too shall throw away every single pot, let him see the fun,' Khuki continued unpacified. 'What does the girl say!' thought the mother.

Two days thence, Khuki was sitting in the kitchen. Dulal hadn't turned up the previous day, he is sure to come today. He couldn't possibly miss playing 'kitchen' with Khuki for long. Khuki's mind is still astir with the events of the previous day.

Her wait did come to an end. But what's this that she is seeing? Dulal—five years old, his thin polio-stricken leg gripped in a special shoe—was floating along like a small boat beside the big frame of her mother, his small hand gripped in hers. 'Khuki,' mother announced, 'both of you shall play here in the kitchen itself; you won't go anywhere else, right?'

Khuki was seething with anger. But her moth-

er's gentle smile worked like magic, and in a moment she had taken Dulal by the hand and settled down to play.

This small event that took place fifty years ago was an object lesson for this obstinate little girl. Without expending a word, her mother had taught her to choose the soothing fragrance of goodwill and love, not the angry blast of revenge. As I remember this, my heart lights up, for that Khuki is none other than me. And that day, unknowingly, I had learnt how to cross bridges.

Another important bridge was built for me when I came to Kolkata in 1978 for my doctoral studies, in pursuance of my mother's express wish. The way I got a place at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture was indeed surprising. The bright sunshine of those days has now mellowed into the glow of dusk. But the warmth of those sunny days continues to envelop me. The affection and benediction of two ochre-clad souls—Swamis Lokeshwaranandaji and Aksharanandaji—were responsible for building this new bridge.

My mother passed away when I was twenty-eight. As she was being wheeled in for a surgery, she told Khuki, 'If I don't return from this surgery, don't be sad. You love Holy Mother (Sri Sarada Devi), hold on to her. I am mortal, she is immortal.' 'Never miss your daily namaz,' she added, 'do not let go of Allah under any circumstance.'

Mother did not return from the surgery. The turbulent waters of samsara began to surround me. Every time I am pounded by these waves and am sinking I try to hold on to Her; and my mother's parting words help me gather strength.

Many have been the days when I have fallen asleep weeping on my namaz-rug. But one day I

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came to realize that I was safe in their lap. And how joyous is this realization! How shall I explain this ineffable gain? What grace, what joy, what a sweet presence! I am not alone! They hold my hand as I stumble along the paths that I keep treading—from darkness to light, and at times from light into darkness.

It was more than two decades ago that I started giving expression to this experience of grace and love—at first through written speeches that I gave in the Yogananda Hall at the Institute of Culture. It was thus that Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda started occupying my thinking. My thoughts took hold of them in a sweep of wondrous faith. Then one day I realized that, unbeknown to me, they had come to occupy not just my thought but my whole being.

‘How did I manage to receive this grace?’ This question is both easy and difficult. For this grace and love is unconditional. Through joy and sorrow, amidst pain and suffering, they remain my shelter—this I believe, and this I know.

Supplication to Allah, and faith in Sri Sarada Devi and Sri Ramakrishna, have brought me to the land of ‘have-alls’. For a householder in samsara, there are times of sorrow and heartbreak, but even these turn out to be transitory. The darkness of night is soon dispelled by the glow of sunrise. What I have asked for is often not what I deserve, but what they grant me is only for my good. This belief is the force that buoys me up and keeps me afloat.

It is because we forget to leave the windows of our hearts open to their influence that we get stuck in the mire of prejudice and bigotry. It is but a reflection of our immaturity and foolhardiness that we remain immersed in the puddle of our egotistic desires—going overboard with joy when these are fulfilled and turning our face away when they are not. But this is inevitable in worldly life. So they have to walk behind us, keeping watch, lest we fall. But we are so preoccupied with ourselves that we fail to hear their footsteps. Those who recognize these sounds as footsteps—and not the mere rus-

tle of fallen leaves—of someone moving with us, watching over us, they cannot help stopping and extending their arms with the faith of a child: ‘You have come, then pull me into the warmth of your breast, let me call you “Mother” as I hide my face in your tender bosom!’

This is the frail link of my faith, the small devotional offering that I have to offer. I am not opulent. This small bud of love is all that I have to offer, even as I try to make it bloom into a white lotus. Their acceptance fills me with a sense of fulfilment.

### Web of Love

16 March 2002, Belur. Today is Sri Ramakrishna’s birthday. I am in Kolkata, undergoing treatment for a cardiac problem. *Muslim Manane Ramakrishna, Sarada, Vivekananda* (Ramakrishna, Sarada, Vivekananda in Muslim thought)—a book that I had compiled and edited—has just been released. The book has been well-received at the book fair. I purchase three big garlands from the first sales proceeds as my offering to the Holy Trio. With closed eyes I seek their presence as I lay my offering at their feet, even as tears well up in my eyes.

I am also privileged to offer my pranams to Swami Ranganathananda, the president of the Ramakrishna Order, and get his blessings. After having prasada I feel the need for rest. My doctor, who has been very kind to drive me to the Math, suggests that I rest on the sprawling lawns of the Math under some tree. But I do not feel well enough to take his advice. I am eager to listen to the erudite discourses billed for the evening, but I just don’t feel strong enough to wait this long on the lawns. I decide to go back to the Institute of Culture, where I am staying. But the driver who will drop me at the nearest taxi stand is not to be seen. I have been standing in the sun—in sweltering heat—for quite some time when I am accosted by a lady. She had visited my home but once, when she was in Dhaka two years back. But she is quick to recognize me: ‘Why, you have been standing in the sun for a long time!’ ‘I am waiting for the driver,’ I reply. ‘Why don’t you come to our flat,



it's right at hand. Rest a while and then listen to the evening discourses before you return.' I feel overwhelmed by this offer. And imagine my surprise when my host not only makes me as comfortable as I could possibly need to be but also gives me a sari that has been offered to Holy Mother. 'I keep the sari you gave me in Dhaka and wear it to the temple,' Didi said, adding to my joyous wonder. Finally, at the end of the discourses I am driven back to the Institute in Didi's vehicle. The incident may hardly appear extraordinary. But to me it is another link in the web of divine love in which I have found myself repeatedly enmeshed all through my life.

### Unconditional Grace

It is 2004. I have been without a job for the last two-and-a-half years. I have also had to undergo three surgeries. These and the attendant costs of chemotherapy and other medicines have left me without any monetary reserves. But surprisingly, I have never felt even once that Allah has not been gracious unto me. Rather, it appears to me that he has sent me these tribulations to make me aware every moment of the day of his grace, and the grace of Thakur (Sri Ramakrishna) and Ma (Sri Sarada Devi).


As I sit on my prayer-rug after offering the *isha* namaz, I am worried. The month is nearing its end and I badly need some money. Just then the phone rings. It is from the Dhaka ashrama. A brahmacharin is on the line: 'Didi, the Chittagong ashrama has sent some money, the sales proceeds of your book *Muslim Manane*. I shall send it over tomorrow.' I am at a loss for words to describe this gain.

In a few days' time, I get a job at Mymensingh, not far from Dhaka. I am still not physically fit, but I cannot afford rest. So, depending on Allah and on Ma and Thakur, I decide to move to Mymensingh. During the day, I have a busy schedule at college, and the evenings are spent searching for a house. After over two weeks I manage to locate a house that would meet my needs, though the stated rent is high.

But I am worried about one thing: how will the owner react to my having a shrine to Mother and Thakur? A Muslim household would find this unusual. So I decide to lay my worries before Ma and Thakur. 'I am worried about you,' I tell them, 'please make a suitable arrangement.' As I wake up from sleep the next day, I can hear Mrs Sarkar, the lady with whom I am staying, speaking over phone: 'Oh! Is that the house next to Babua's?' The president of the local Ramakrishna ashrama is on the phone; the house that I am to move into belongs to a Hindu family.

I continue to live in this house. I move in a world that is Mother's and Ramakrishna's. I can serve them in my own way. I always loved flowers, but never thought of growing them. Now I have a small 'tub garden' and I am able to offer them flowers of varying colours even as the spray of colours in the sky announces the break of dawn. I realize that I am not alone. Mine is not a worthy service, but their grace is unconditional. I have found shelter with them so very easily. My heart is filled with peace and joy as I offer namaz and read the Quran in front of them.

What I share are subjective experiences. And the validity of subjective experiences is bound to vary with the subject. But I had been searching for peace with a burning heart. I have been irresistibly drawn to a place where I have nothing to lose; I am face to face with a reality that only waits to be accepted. I share these experiences only with the thought that there might be others who are in search of a shelter, as I had been. My life experiences are derived from grace alone, a grace that is independent of theology or metaphysics; a grace that responds to sincere seeking and earnest calling—a call that is not jarred by selfish shouts.

The boat of little Khuki's life is now moving with the ebb; it has remained afloat on the sea of life despite being rocked often; it has had the occasion to have a glimpse of truth, beauty, and goodness—however faint that glimpse might have been. Now as it rushes towards the ocean, her ears are eager to hear the rumble of the high seas. 



# God for Everyday Life

## A Brazilian Admirer

ONE of the questions that have bothered me is, should we or should we not pray to God for things of the world? When I say this, I have in mind supplication for the elimination of sufferings, the termination of problems, and so on, and not prayer for luxuries.

I have always believed in the supernatural. Since my childhood, in one way or the other, I have been connected with the supernatural; and I have also been fortunate to visit churches. Though not born in a very orthodox or religious family, by the grace of God, I got the opportunity of associating with religious people, and doing whatever little I could, in my own small way, in the service of God. In retrospect, it appears that everything that happened was the play of the supernatural.

As a boy, I knew little about the Indian concepts of God and the supernatural. My beliefs were formed by what I used to hear in my country, Brazil. I had the opportunity of being with, and helping, Christian fathers. All this helped me a lot. Somehow I feel that the divine has kept me engaged with itself all through my life. Not that I was seeking God—like anybody else, I was a common and curious student, that's all. But still, I kept searching for greater avenues of approaching religion and God. I visited various religious groups in my city. All this finally led me to Vedanta.

### ***Vedanta Movement in South America***

One day, I landed in the 'Vedanta House'—the former 'Vedanta Society' of this city, built and nurtured by a gentleman, Mr Djalme Gomes by name, and some of his friends. His house was the 'Vedanta House'. Today, that very house is the Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama of the Ramakrishna Order. Mr Djalme was a musician and played the piano. He would also repair pianos. He and his

Japanese friend, Mr Tanetaka To, had set up a piano repairing business in this place. Even to this day, our great friend Mr Tanetaka To lives in the ashrama and works on pianos. They, along with a few other Brazilian people, had heard of Vedanta during the 1950s. Swami Tilak, who belonged to another order, brought not only Vedanta, but also the thoughts of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda to Brazil, before the monks of the Ramakrishna Order presented these thoughts.

Mr Djalme and the other admirers of Vedanta would invite friends for discussing Vedanta and practising meditation. Saturday evenings were devoted to reading, listening, and discussing Vedanta. These admirers, along with some others from another city, had brought Swami Vijayananda—the first resident monk of Vedanta in South America, who founded the Vedanta Centre in Buenos Aires, Argentina—to Brazil. There was a young Brazilian who used to sell books; he had put up a little box in front of his shop with this notice: 'Donate to bring an Indian monk to Brazil.' He passed away only recently.

Swami Vijayananda visited Brazil as frequently as possible. On Saturdays, the admirers used to play his taped Spanish talks, and would meditate afterwards. By the time I started frequenting the Vedanta group, Swami Vijayananda had already passed on, and Swami Paratparananda, and after him Swami Pareshananda, were in charge of the centre at Buenos Aires. They also used to visit Brazil frequently, and we had the opportunity of meeting them. We also had the blessed visits of Pravrajikas Bhaktiprana and Satchitprana, apart from the visits of great monks like Swamis Bhavyananda of London and Ritajananda of France. Recently, we had the holy visit of Swami Smaranananda, the present vice-president of the Ramakrishna Order. And fi-

nally, we have here Swami Nirmalatmananda, the monk sent by the Ramakrishna Order to conduct the work in Brazil.

### ***Involvement in the Ramakrishna Movement***

Coming back to my first visit to the Vedanta group, I recall that I was well received. Mr Djalme was cordial and I was happy. I somehow felt that I had some soul-contact with this place. Gradually my visits to the group became more and more frequent. I started taking an active part in the work there. I was pleased with the broad and universal philosophy of Vedanta, which had no place for superstitions. What appeared interesting in Vedanta was its wholesome attitude, its holistic approach to life and its problems. As I said, I was searching for a solution to the question of whether life should be separated from the 'Sunday-church God'. The answer was here. As Sister Nivedita says, 'to labour is to pray'.

We had the good fortune of meeting, serving, and accompanying monks of the Ramakrishna Order to some of the other cities of Brazil. Thus our affinity with Vedanta increased.

Vedanta is a living philosophy of life. It touches every aspect of life, and wherever it goes, it improves the situation. Vedanta is scientific—nothing of hotchpotch here. So it is very heartening.

Vedanta does not give much importance to strange happenings, miracles, and so on; but the supernatural or divine in Vedanta is ever awake—working secretly for the benefit of the admirer. Miracles, in a different sense of the term, do happen. When we see many people with many difficulties suddenly getting new lives, realizing new meanings, acquiring new aspirations, breathing newer motivations—we see miracles happening. When we see patients with cancer feeling strong because they have a Holy Mother to rely on, or because they are Vedantins, we feel that the miracle is happening. During all these years in Vedanta, I have seen many such miracles. Let alone grand happenings, even smaller miracles of life are interesting and touch the heart. When we see such things happen in our lives,



*The shrine on Holy Mother's birthday, São Paulo*

we realize that the supernatural is not selective in its approach, it is for all—the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich. I would like to share with you the following stories which I have heard and seen—simple stories with deep significance.

### ***The Guiding Hand of the Divine***

You are in some place, attending a meeting. When you come out, you see to your astonishment that your vehicle is gone. It has vanished into thin air. You are shocked. People advise you to call the police, to do this and to do that. With all your attempts to get your vehicle back, nothing seems to happen. You don't know what to do, and so keep praying, 'If there is a God, let him help me.' You are also a Vedantin, and try not to be weak and lose hope. And then, three months later, the police call you. You go there, and there it is, your vehicle. But there is a difference: the car you see is perfectly remodelled, all broken parts repaired, freshly painted and in excellent working condition—all done for free. The supernatural takes your broken car to some mysterious garage for some days for remodelling!

You are going to some place, driving your car. You have lost your way, and don't know how to get to your destination; but you have to reach there on time. You stop your car and request somebody for directions. That person, looking at you, tells you that he knows you. You are surprised. In a city teeming with people, it is a rare coincidence to know someone in such a strange way. You are pleased to meet that man. And when you are about

to ask that man for directions, you have one more surprise awaiting: he says that he is waiting for the city bus to take him to a building which is in the very area you are heading for! And you both go together.

You are desperate to get government approval for some project of yours, but the bureaucracy is delaying it. The hope for you, a Vedantin, is to pray to the Lord. You pray. And then, when all appears to be lost, when you have almost given up hope, you see the sunshine—one of the authorities calls you to say that they have some doubts about your project, and wish you could be there the next day, making an appointment, to explain your situation. You go there but the officer is supremely busy. You wait outside. And then you are called in. The officer appears to be a very good person. When you go to meet him, to speak about your project, he motions you to sit down, and says, 'I shall just finish signing

this one project, which is pending, and shall talk to you. Could you please wait?' As he turns the pages of the project in his hands, you see that it is your project that he is signing.

A gentleman is quietly reading books on Yoga and Vedanta. He does not know any Vedantin, or about the Vedanta centre. He is also trying to practise meditation, but unfortunately, has doubts about his practice. They can't be resolved. Suddenly, unknowingly, he picks up a book on Vedanta, sees a telephone number, and calls up the place. The person who answers invites him to the centre, and says that the author of that particular book he refers to is there visiting the centre. The joy of the student of Vedanta knows no bounds. He comes to the centre, talks to the monk who has written the book on meditation, and all his doubts are gone.

Vedanta does not accept miracles, but perhaps a better word could be 'coincidence'.



## Responsibility of Students of Vedanta

**D**o the students of Vedanta realize that they have great responsibility on their shoulders? ... The intermingling of cultures that is going on so rapidly at the present time will eventually lead to a universal culture in which the whole of humanity will participate. Religion, too, is aiming at that universality. ... This universality is going to be the keynote of future mankind. And man's honest efforts at the present time should be to actualize this much-desired future as early as possible. For on this depends the peace and prosperity and the spiritual welfare of mankind. ...

We have to change and remodel ourselves after the future ideals. And herein lies the great responsibility of the Vedanta students. Vedanta stands above all for universality, oneness, synthesis, harmony, and infinite affirmation. Vedanta is a philosophy and religion of infinite hope. It promises infinite glory to mankind. It invites men to march forward from one achievement to another, till the very highest is attained. It stands for the unity of mankind. All true students of Vedanta have to feel and

realize this fact. They have, above all, to be all-inclusive and harmonious. By their lives they have to prove to the timid world the beauty of the new ideals towards which humanity is reaching. ... They have to demonstrate to others that these new ideals are infinitely more helpful than the older creedal and sectarian ideals. Do they feel that they are the forerunners of the new age? Those who feel so, will surely prove a valuable asset to humanity. None may know of them, they may be looked upon as ordinary; yet the high potency of their thought and life will bring about revolutionary changes in the mental plane of humanity and will eventually set forces in motion which will greatly alter also the outer life.

The challenge of Vedanta is tremendous. The weak may shrink from it, but those who have any strength in them will take it up and rise to the required heights. ... Let the best (and everyone has got the best in him or her) in us come out, let the Divine in us shine forth! Let the light in us be a beacon to the blundering world!

—Swami Ashokananda



BRIAN ERIKSSON

# Mother Divine

Brian Eriksson

*Garden shrine at Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, Durban*

IT is the autumn of 1976. Swami Shivapadananda, spiritual head of the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa in Durban, is sitting in front of a garden shrine in the ashrama grounds. Gangadhar built the garden shrine and I painted a multi-coloured lotus on a large rock behind the image of Sri Ramakrishna. We greet Shivapadanandaji one by one and receive his blessing. He taps us on the back as we touch his feet. I tell him about the plans Gangadhar and I have for the garden. 'We are going to paint more sayings on large slabs of rock. Gangadhar plans to set up a warren for rabbits and guinea pigs.'

'But you are going back to Johannesburg,' Shivapadanandaji says suddenly. I am surprised and disappointed. Johannesburg is the largest city in the world that is not next to the sea or a river. It is built on an underground river of gold. At this stage of my understanding, naive that I am, gold and materialism are synonymous.

I was born and brought up in Johannesburg. I am enjoying the spiritual life and atmosphere of the ashrama. Sitting at Shivapadanandaji's feet and absorbing his teachings is enriching and enlightening. I am at home and happy.

However, my parents are concerned about me and are troubled. All the time during my stay at the ashrama, my parents were at the back of my mind. I never wanted to hurt or disappoint them. I had never informed Shivapadanandaji of my parent's reactions.

'You must please your parents,' Shivapadanandaji says, right on cue. I have to pause and catch

my breath. What can I tell one who seems to know all? However fast I may run, the swami is always miles ahead. The highest and farthest point that I can reach is where he begins.

'That's what has been troubling me, Swamiji,' I say once I have caught my breath. 'I don't know if I should worship the Divine Mother in the ashrama, or serve my earthly mother in Johannesburg.'

Shivapadanandaji turns his face to me, and gazing deeply into my eyes says, 'The one is a manifestation of the other.' The answer carries emphasis and is delivered without a moment's hesitation. I am stunned by his perceptive reply. His words are instantly and indelibly written on my soul.

That night I dream I am in Johannesburg, standing in front of a mirror in the bathroom of the family home. I am wearing a turban. In the dream, I have a thin beard and a neat moustache edging my face. I put a shawl around my shoulders as men do in India, though this one is too richly patterned. I look into the passage and see the perfect shawl hanging on the doorframe between my room and my parents' room. As I reach for it, I see Ma reading in bed in the light of the bedside lamp. I cannot see Dad as he is behind the door. 'Where are you going so early?' Ma asks as she puts her reading glasses aside. 'I am coming home, Ma,' I mumble as I wake up.

Peacocks call from the trees. Monkeys scuttle into the kitchen. Devotees walk barefoot into the shrine for morning songs and prayers. I pack my bags and embrace Gangadhar. When I take my leave of Shivapadanandaji, he gives me a powerful wallop across my back that electrifies every atom in my veins. I head back to Johannesburg. Mother Divine is waiting.



Brian Eriksson is a devotee associated with the Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa.



# Sri Ramakrishna's Influence on Me

Talari Anantha Babu

IN this land, which has given to the world more saints than any other country, Sri Ramakrishna stands out as the nearest approximation to the Divine. In 1942, the first full English edition of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* was released. In 1944, as a student of Madras Law College, I stood first in the university for jurisprudence. I was awarded the 'K K Menon Cash Prize' of Rs 40, with which I was supposed to purchase law books. Breaking the convention, I purchased the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and another book. I was nineteen years old at that time, and the purchase was intended for my aunt, a renowned social worker and deeply religious lady. Several years passed before I read the book. Once I read it, I was fascinated. The words spoken by holy people have an inexplicably greater impact than the same words spoken by others. We should be eternally grateful to Mahendranath Gupta for reproducing the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna as they were spoken. Probably, when I finally read the book, my heart was open to receive its message. Over the years I must have read it a hundred times. The most admirable and effective feature of the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna is the simplicity of thought and expression. This enables even a person who is not learned or intelligent to understand them.


When my wife and I visited Belur Math, Rani Rasmani's temple complex and gardens at Dakshineswar, and other places hallowed by Sri Ramakrishna's feet, the impact of the teachings of the Gospel on me was enhanced. I imagine that, after returning from this pilgrimage, we were not the same persons, but in some unknown way had changed for the better. It is said in the Bhagavad-

gita that God resides in the heart of all beings—*ishvarah sarvabhutanam hriddeshē'juna tishthati*. He is dormant, a passive spectator of what is going on. He can be activated by spiritual discipline. Awareness of him prompts a person to do good and refrain from bad things. As an aspirant's spiritual practices intensify, God plays a more active role in his or her life. When someone is spiritually fully advanced, the divine heart permeates his or her whole being, and the person becomes an avatara. This is my understanding of this phenomenon. I may be right or wrong. I felt this is how Sri Ramakrishna evolved into God. It is said that even Sri Rama did not know he was God. The life of Sri Ramakrishna in my view explains how a human being evolves into God. Thus his life serves as an inspiration to all of us. My constant reading of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* kindled in me a desire to do good and abstain from doing wrong. If I have not made substantial progress in this practice, it is due to the inadequacy of my efforts. But Sri Ramakrishna has had an inexplicable effect on my entire life.

The years rolled by and I was visiting the Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad, at first occasionally and then frequently. Listening to the lectures of Swami Ranganathananda and Swami Paramarthananda enhanced my worship of Sri Ramakrishna. What fascinated me most was the simplicity of his teachings. The homely manner in which he stated propositions of great philosophical depth went straight to my heart. As I look back, I realize that this fascination and the sense of homage I developed for Sri Ramakrishna was responsible for my endeavouring to share this experience and happiness with others, though I have never precisely analysed this aspect of my life. The most convenient procedure for me

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was to distribute Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature and other religious books like the Gita to others, irrespective of whether they would be interested in and benefited by these books or not. I was confident that, if not the recipient, somebody or other would benefit. Under the inspiration of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, I also wrote a book in English—*God and the Householder*—which is available in Telugu and Hindi editions. The contents of the book reflect my understanding of the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna as set out in the *Gospel*. These books have proved very popular. I have also distributed more than a million books of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature. I have derived more joy from this activity than from all my successes and achievements in other walks of life. An attempt to analyse the impact of Sri Ramakrishna on my life in words is an exercise in futility. The responses of the heart are too fine and subtle to be expressed in words. I would conclude by saying that my contact with Sri Ramakrishna through the *Gospel* has enriched my whole life and left me a better human being. 

**O**ne day, in an inspired mood, M [Mahendranath Gupta] was trying to describe his Master. He said:

'The Master was like a five-year-old boy always running to meet his Mother.

'The Master was like a beautiful flower whose nature was to bloom and spread its fragrance.

'The Master was like a bonfire from which other lamps were lighted.

'The Master was like a celestial vina always absorbed in singing the glory of the Divine Mother.

'The Master was like a big fish joyfully swimming in calm, clear, blue waters, the Ocean of Satchidananda.

'The Master was like a bird which had lost its nest in a storm and then, perched on the threshold of the Infinite, was joyfully moving between the two realms, singing the glory of the Infinite.'

After trying to describe the Master in many ways, he said that all these similies were inadequate. The Infinite cannot be expressed in words.

—*They Lived with God*

## The Wise Rustic

**S**pirituality is not high up there in the skies, or something to arrive at in the next birth. It is present now, here, down on this real earth; and as the greatest common factor of our being, is realized by the humblest among us. This is what the rishis have been telling us right from the Vedic times. I had a glimpse of this many years ago.

It was 1979, and I was returning from my maiden pilgrimage to the shrines of Kedar and Badri in Uttarakhand. We were a group of three, but all of us were tired beyond words. Food, shelter, and conveyance were all at a premium during the long hazardous trek that the pilgrimage was in those days. As a result, my stomach got badly upset and I had to avail myself of the lavatory every now and then. At the bus stand in Rishikesh, our bus to Hardwar was humming to a start when I had to again rush to the lavatory, located at some distance. Unfortunately, the place had no supply of water. And I

was so exhausted that I could not even pull myself up to stand on my own. It was dark, and I saw a human figure moving among the shadows around. I clapped my hands and called for help. An old rustic wearing a turban responded to my call, a mug of water in hand. I managed to wash myself with his help and then started searching my pockets for money. They were empty; my purse was with my companion in the bus. So I just folded my hands in polite thankfulness and said, '*Bhaiya, bhagwan ap ka bhala kare*; Brother, May God bless you!' The man peered at me in the dark and whispered as he walked away, '*Magar bhagwan sabhi ke andar hai na, Babuji*; But Sir, is not God within everyone?' I had no words for him. I stood stunned. I forgot even my bus taking off.

Even today I have no words for him. I stand stunned. And I don't care if I miss my bus.

—*Prof. V N Namboodiri, Thiruvananthapuram*

# A Catalyst

Sundaram



Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam,  
February 2007

**M**Y name is Sundaram. I am an auto-rickshaw driver in the city of Chennai. One hot afternoon I was waiting for customers. To my joy, a pious-looking gentleman walked towards me and asked if I were willing to drive him to the Ramakrishna Math. I willingly agreed. My passenger had a happy look on his face. Maybe he appreciated my agreeing to take him without fuss. It must have come as a surprise and a welcome relief to the gentleman that I was a docile person.

When he said 'Ramakrishna Math', I was reminded of the Tamil magazine *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam*, which I used to read once in a while with interest. When I was a young boy, my father would sometimes give me that magazine to make me read some good articles. Just to start a conversation, I told the gentleman travelling with me that *Sri Ramakrishna Vijayam*, published from the Math, was a very nice magazine. He asked me if I had read it. I answered 'Yes'. And I said that it kindles the imagination of even those who do not have much devotion to God and helps to build up mental strength.

When we were nearing the gates of the Ramakrishna Math, he asked me whether I would like to come in. I agreed and entered the ashrama premises for the very first time. The gentleman bought a copy of the current issue of *Vijayam* and presented it to me. He didn't stop with that. He also paid for a year's gift subscription for the magazine in my name. This was, mind you, in addition to the fare which he had paid for his trip, along with a tip!

The majestic picture of Swami Vivekananda was on the cover page of the issue of *Vijayam* which was presented to me by that kind gentleman. I do not think that this was a mere coincidence. I always be-

lieve that destiny takes us forward with a definite, well-defined agenda. When I saw that picture, I felt an upsurge of emotion and enthusiasm and an urge to do something more in my life, which had been directionless till then. There were times when I had asked myself what I was doing with my life, and I used to feel that I was driving it as carelessly as my vehicle!

That night I slept soundly, with an indescribable peace in my mind. The next day I went to a bookstall near my house to buy two more copies of the magazine to present to my friends. The stall owner told me that he was not keeping the magazine in his shop, because the agent who used to supply it was not doing so anymore. He added, 'In fact, that magazine was selling very well.' I said to him, 'If I arrange to give it every month, will you sell it in your shop?' He replied, 'Certainly. It is a blessing to be able to sell it in my shop.'

A strange thought came to my mind: 'Why should I not take up the sacred work of supplying copies of the *Vijayam* to the local bookstalls in my spare time?' I immediately contacted the gentleman who had purchased and presented my first *Vijayam* copy the other day. He encouraged me and applauded my suggestion and initiative. He purchased fifty copies of the magazine and gave them to me. I took them to various bookshops. Some shops accepted them for sale immediately. Some others refused. When some copies remained with me, I revisited the shops which had earlier refused, and a little convincing did the trick. I sincerely prayed to Swami Vivekananda that *Vijayam* should adorn every household. During the next few months, I could arrange for the sale of a large number of *Vijayam* copies.

Even seeing the image of Swami Vivekananda

inspires one to noble activities. Swamiji has given us plenty of messages aimed at refining our human qualities. We must make an effort to follow at least a few of them in our lives. Let us try to remove our imperfections one by one, face ordeals boldly, shun superstitious beliefs, and work hard till we emerge victorious. Finally, there is always a 'payment time'.


I used to have an inferiority complex. I knew it was a disease. The elixir called 'Swamiji' was the only effective medicine which could cure me. Nowadays, the message of Swamiji which constantly rings in my mind whenever I take up any assignment is 'I can do it'. The energy, fearlessness, and confidence it gives are tremendous!

I have now started believing in myself more. I know now that failure is not something to be regretted and moaned over. I know now that rewards and praise come only to those who do not consider themselves inferior. I have also realized my God-given strength, which takes the colour of success only after getting exposed to divine dispensation.

When *Vijayam* visits our homes it blesses us with many benefits. It simplifies even intricate texts (intricate, maybe, for a layman like me) and renders them in a language which is easily understood by all. For students and youth, the magazine is invaluable,

as it answers the questions and doubts which are peculiar to their growing age. The generation gap between parents and children has increased today. *Vijayam*, through many instructive stories and illustrative incidents from the treasure trove of the epics, succeeds in reducing this gap.

My goal in life is to sow good seeds in the minds of men and women and get a bumper harvest. They should not be genetically modified (GM) seeds, which cannot be propagated. *Vijayam* must not only be sold in the Chennai metro, but should reach every nook and corner, every home and school, in the state of Tamil Nadu. That is my dream. I want to dream this dream when I am awake!

Whoever reads this should recommend this magazine to others and introduce them to the amazing wealth contained in its forty-eight-odd pages. By spreading the messages of many illustrious souls, *Vijayam* has reached a print circulation of over a hundred thousand copies. It should scale many more new heights. *Vijayam* came into my life and served as a motivating force of immense power, transforming, guiding, and strengthening me. My prayer is that it should enlighten more lives and charge readers with a surge of energy to create the resurgent India of Swamiji's dreams. 

## Reflecting on Death

I believe that the fear of death is the fear of the unknown and also the fear of losing something that is dear to us. I often say to people, 'If you are worried about dying, don't worry, you will all die successfully.' However, beneath the fear of death is the fear of looking into ourselves. So death, in fact, teaches us how to come to terms with life. As another example, among the Krishna contemplatives there is a saying, 'Remember dying, because if we remember dying, then we might remember what living is.'

So as you can see, in all spiritual traditions, reflection on death is almost equal to meditating on God because it makes us look beyond our material world to a state of deeper meaning.

Moreover, when we reflect on death we can see that

the reality of death comes with a warning: 'This body will become a corpse.' When we begin to look into death, we can realize that our death lives with us every moment of our life. For example, while we are exhaling breath, we cannot breathe in. That is death. So as we look into death in that manner, it helps us to sort out our priorities and find the meaning of life.

Furthermore, reflecting on impermanence helps us to realize the wisdom of non-attachment. So in some ways death is one of our greatest teachers. It teaches us about life. What's more, by looking deeply into death we come to realize that our innermost nature is something that transcends both life and death.

—Sogyal Rinpoche,  
in *The Mind of the Guru*



# Spirituality, Faith, and Consciousness

Dr D N Gautam

CREATION does not permit of any mutually exclusive division between spirituality and materialism, except in the domain of pure Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, which is non-material. So everything material has also a spiritual side to it, though the converse is not true. Every material object has an enduring 'existence'—notwithstanding changes in name and form; its 'knowledge' and 'bliss' aspects determine its flavour and fragrance. Living beings exist, are capable of knowing, and also enjoy bliss in varying degrees. But humans alone, of all living beings, are said to be capable of completely merging in Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. Though, logically speaking, every object is derived from the Absolute, humans alone have the capacity to know, understand, experience, divine, visualize, realize, and actualize. These capacities could also serve as indicators of the extent to which spirituality is manifested in an individual's life. These are reflected in such manifest values as curiosity, enthusiasm, faith, morality, humility, gratitude, service, non-injury, and other attributes which are considered divine (*daivi*).

The Bhagavadgita and the Bhagavata list numerous divine attributes—kindness, service-mindedness, faith, dedication, and so on—that characterize a devotee. These attributes are also spiritual qualities that one ought to cultivate. A keen observer would probably agree that humans do not have a monopoly over these spiritual values. Unfortunately, we often tend to think that the rest of Creation exists for exploitation by humans, and we also act on this belief, often with disastrous consequences. Humans may take more than what they

give, but the rest of Creation exhibits no such greed or dishonesty. Animals have been known to display such qualities as loyalty, faithfulness, gratitude, and courage—qualities we associate with spirituality; such stories of war horses, pets, and even wild animals are a part of folklore. These are no less appreciated or acclaimed than the stories of men and women who do a good turn to a fellow being or to society, and keep the flag of spirituality flying high. Here is one such example.

## The Grateful Ox

It was a summer day in the 1950s. It was time to plough the fields before the rains. A young farmer had lost one of his oxen and had gone to a nearby animal market to buy one. As he walked past a file of old bullocks, a very old ox let out a long sad low: 'baunnn...gh'. The sensitive farmer stepped back, looked at the ox, and moved on, only to be checked by another call, tinged with more pain and pleading. This time the farmer lovingly touched the ox's forehead; but as he turned to go, the old ox called out again, putting all heart and soul in the low. As the farmer caressed it on its shoulder, he found the ox shedding copious tears. Just when he was asking it the reason for its sorrow, a butcher appeared on the scene. They knew each other, and the butcher told the farmer that the plough-ox he was looking for could be had in another section of the market.

But a bond had already been established between the farmer and the ox. The farmer had spoken a few words to the ox, and it seemed to convey through its nods and licks that it understood. The young farmer now announced his intention to buy the old ox. The elderly butcher tried to make him see reason, but to no avail. The butcher then told

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the adamant farmer that he had already bought the ox for a hundred rupees, hoping that this would settle the issue. But the farmer was not ready to allow the ox to go under the butcher's knife at any cost. Making a last attempt at dissuasion, the butcher demanded a hundred and fifty rupees for the ox. To his surprise, the farmer handed him the amount without a second thought and moved out of the market. Though a bit confused by the turn of events, the farmer was happy; and the ox followed him of its own accord. As they left the market, a grateful 'baunnn...gh' broke his reverie. 'Oh! I had forgotten you,' he interjected, 'come along; but can you survive a twenty kilometre walk?'

Well! Not only did the ox survive the long walk to its new home, it toiled hard for over three years for his saviour, setting to rest all the ridicule that its master had earned for this 'prize purchase'. It put younger oxen to shame while carrying loads. It could be coupled to either side of the yoke, though it had earlier been used only on one side, that being the common practice for habituating the oxen to their task. Providence was also kind, and the farmer had a record produce.

Finally, it was time to take leave. The harvest season was over. As the farmer closed the door of the cattle pen, an unusually long 'baunnn...gh' greeted his ears. He reopened the door and felt that the ox was signalling him to come close. As he walked over and caressed it, tears started rolling down from its eyes. It then lay down quietly. The farmer sensed that its end was near. He rushed to his house, fetched some Ganga-water and tulsi leaves and, keeping its head in his lap, put these in its mouth; and expressing gratitude for the services it had rendered, whispered the divine name 'Ram-Ram' in its ear. The soul moved out immediately, leaving behind the animal carcass and this inspiring story.

This is a story of faith. Business may fail but faith does not. There is immense power in faith, and the only limitations it succumbs to are the ones we ourselves place on it. For, by its very nature, faith is entirely faithful, even to our prevarications, ca-

price, and unsteady mental waves. Faith is gracious in making us masters of our own destiny. It flowers when doubts and fear are dispelled.

Humans have five senses for external perceptions and the mind to evaluate these experiences. The evaluation is assisted by our individual as well as collective memories. The rishis could also draw upon the cosmic memory or cosmic consciousness. Science and technology have remarkably expanded the frontiers of knowledge. But the extension services of technology are available only in the field of the senses, and that too with many limitations. Qualia, or perceptions in themselves, have defied objectification. That is why the claim of 'immediate' or non-sensory perception of the rishis and yogis deserves special attention. It would help to remember the humbling limitations of the scientific mind if we are to view the experiences narrated below for what they possibly are.

### ***Deities in Search of Devotees***

At Bilrahi, a small village in the Mahoba district of Uttar Pradesh, there was a poor herdsman who used to make a living by grazing the domestic animals of his village for a small remuneration. He would bring back the herd in the evening, handing over each animal to its master. He would then go straight to the Krishna temple that was on the way to his home, witness the evening worship, take prasad, and go home. This routine had attained the regularity of planetary movement. One particular evening, however, he was delayed searching for a missing cow. He was sad at having to miss his darshan of the deity and the prasad. Imagine his surprise and joy when he saw Ori Bau, the old lady priestess of the temple, sitting on the temple veranda with prasad and *charanamrita*, consecrated water. Ori Bau inquired about his welfare and the reason for his delay, which the cowherd spelt out to her.

Next morning, when he was taking the animals out for grazing, he met Ori Bau again. He was puzzled when Ori Bau asked him what went wrong the previous evening and why he could not come to

the temple. The herdsman expressed his gratitude again to Ori Bau for waiting for him the previous evening. Now it was Ori Bau's turn to be taken by surprise; she had never waited for him, and this denial left them both speechless. Ori Bau was the first to recover, and was soon hurling invectives at 'Sri Radhaju' (Srimati Radha) for giving darshan and prasad and 'talking to that fool, with absolutely no thought for the wretched woman doing your service'. Now, who was that old woman lovingly waiting for the poor cowherd?

Here is another story of a farmer from Bamarara in Mahoba, who is presently about seventy years old. One afternoon, while returning home after ploughing his fields, he was stopped by a tall graceful man who asked him to accompany him to the nearby temple of Sri Hanuman. The farmer would not agree; the bullocks were hungry and thirsty, they had to be tended to first. But the stranger insisted that the matter was urgent and would take only a few minutes; so the farmer had to comply. On reaching the temple, the stranger asked the farmer to sit in the portico and then revealed his identity: he was Sri Hanuman himself, and wanted to confer on him certain powers to cure ailments. The farmer said that he would have nothing of this. He was happy to have had the darshan and grace of his master, but he did not need any special powers. Besides, he was too insignificant a person to be worthy of any special powers. But Sri Hanuman was not to be dissuaded.

For many years this simple farmer helped many people recover from ailments. But when I met him some time back he had stopped his services. His own wife had died a few years back, and his children felt that their father had been negligent in not using his powers to cure their mother. 'What could I do,' the farmer told me, 'I had already told Hanumanji some time back that I would not be able to carry on with this responsibility any more. That is because the code of conduct prescribed by Hanumanji was proving too tiresome for me. I had been warned not take even a glass of water or a grain of food while in the villages of patients. As I would

get calls from distant places, this would often mean prolonged fasts.' And, of course, he was also not to accept anything as remuneration. The beneficiaries could, if they so insisted, offer a coconut to their village deity and feed small girls according to their means, out of their honest earnings and without incurring debt.

When Sri Hanuman had insisted on giving him this power, the farmer had asked him why he was being put to this bother when Sri Hanuman had the whole world to confer the boon upon; he had also requested that he be allowed to till his fields in peace. I now asked him what Sri Hanuman had to say to this. The farmer's reply proved a great eye-opener for me. Sri Hanuman had told him, 'Son, you are one of the few people who have maintained the marital purity of seeing all women as mother. Sri Ram wants to give away everything, but whom to give to remains a big question. You must accept this boon and serve him by serving people in need.' The virtue of purity, I realized, has great spiritual value.

By all accounts it appears that God and his divine attributes have not gone anywhere. They are very much here, to be had at will. In fact, the Divine is always on the lookout for a child who could be given all that he has. But like a wise father who would sadly disinherit a wayward son, he finds himself in an unenviable position. In his infinite mercy he would not bestow high powers on the unprepared, as that would destroy them, just as every day we see people trying to prove themselves unworthy of good fortune.

### ***The Limits of Consciousness***


Consciousness is an inexhaustible power that is harnessed through the medium of faith. It is the noumenon that fills the cosmos and is working in all phenomena. Let me cite a personal experience that highlights an area of consciousness that we often overlook.

It was around 1990. I had checked in at Betala National Park, in the Palamau district of the present Jharkhand state. That night a strange dream jerked

me awake. I dreamt that I had a live fowl in my right hand—its neck half cut and drooping, with blood flowing—and a blade in my left hand. The fowl was asking me what harm it had caused me that I should cut its neck. I could sleep no more. I tried to mentally survey the well-being of my family members, relations, and friends; but I felt assured that there was no cause for worry and that everything was all right.

Next morning, the local police officer who was attending on me told me that there had been a minor ‘mishap’ the previous evening. He had told the cook that only simple food was to be cooked for me. A little later he felt that he should go and tell the cook that I was a strict vegetarian. Unfortu-

nately, by the time he met the cook, the latter had already beheaded a fowl for supper. Surprisingly, what he saw of the fowl matched the image I saw in my dream.

I still do not fully understand the meaning of this incident. Free from the cage of its body, the bird-spirit could apparently relate to the spirit trapped in my body. This also convinced me that leaving the gross body is not the end of the story. The departing spirit conveyed the message that an individual’s responsibility extends to the entire existence and covers the whole of ‘consciousness’. None can isolate themselves from the rest of existence. The material, it seems, doesn’t matter much; the immaterial does. 



## Swami Vivekananda’s Worship

**O**n one occasion Swamiji said that he would do the worship of Sri Ramakrishna that day. So all of us disciples went to watch Swamiji do it; we were curious to see how he would perform the ritual. First, in the usual way, he took his seat as worshipper and meditated. We meditated, too. After a pretty long time we sensed that someone was moving among us. I opened my eyes to see who it was. It was Swamiji, and he had got up, bringing the tray of flowers meant to be offered to Sri Ramakrishna. But instead of placing them before the Lord, he came to us, and, touching the flowers with sandal paste, placed one on the head of each.

Considered from the ordinary traditional standpoint, this was an anti-traditional act. Imagine flowers meant for the deity offered by a master to his disciples! In addition, any offering first used for anything else cannot later be presented to the deity. But now Swamiji approached the altar and offered the flowers remaining on the tray before the picture of Sri Ramakrishna. Also, he dispensed with the usual rites. Then he indicated that the time had come for the food offering to be brought,

and as we all got up to leave the room—for, when the food offering is given, it is customary in India for no one to remain in the shrine—we heard Swamiji saying, addressing Sri Ramakrishna: ‘Friend, eat!’ Then he came out of the shrine-room and closed it, his eyes bloodshot from ecstasy. ...

Actually, Swamiji did not worship the disciples. In placing the flower on the head of each of us he was really offering the flower at the feet of Ramakrishna in each disciple. Thereby he was awakening his presence in us. That presence took different aspects in each. Some were devotional; others had the jnana aspect predominant. By his act of worship Swamiji awakened the Divine in us. The remaining flowers were not in any way polluted. The same divine presence which Swamiji saw in the photograph of Ramakrishna on the altar he also saw in his disciples, and at that altar he offered the remaining flowers. Lastly, Swamiji’s relation to his Chosen Ideal was that of friend. That, of course, is why in offering the food he addressed Sri Ramakrishna by that term.

—Swami Bodhananda



# ***Judging Religious Cultures***

**Dr Saibal Gupta**

## ***Iftar on the Way to Dhaka***

SOME years ago I was travelling from Chattergram to Dhaka, in Bangladesh, by bus. It was Durga Puja season, and also the month of Ramadan. It is a curious coincidence that the Durga Puja, Navaratri, and Yom Kippur are all celebrated at more or less the same time, a fact that is probably related to the agrarian calendar. This particular year, Ramadan too fell at this time. After we had travelled for about an hour the bus stopped by the roadside and the driver announced that the ten-minute stop was to allow us to perform the Asr Namaz at a small roadside mosque. This must be done before sunset; just after sunset, Iftar, the traditional breaking of fast, is to be done. The young man sitting beside me got up and asked whether I would get down. I had a mind to say yes as my idea of divinity is secular, but thought better of it because I was not familiar with the ritual and my presence could have been misconstrued as mockery. I also found that there were a few other people in the back rows of the bus who were not getting down. Shortly, those who had gone to pray returned, the bus resumed its journey, and I dozed off. The same young man woke me up a little later and asked me to perform Iftar. Boxes containing foodstuff had been supplied to each passenger. I asked sleepily whether it was time already. My neighbour said the prescribed time for that day was 5.26 p.m. and it was already past that time. I do not mind eating anything as long as it does not make me sick; and the contents of the box were clean and well-prepared. I tasted a little bit of everything and closed the box. My neighbour smiled at me; he had done like-

wise with his food and we shared the joy of Iftar. I got the feeling that by partaking of that small amount of food I was gaining acceptance in a country that had been mine until fifty years back. But how would my own society and religious associates have reacted to this same act if it were a hundred years ago and the country my own? I laughed and went back to sleep.

All through this journey I found roadside restaurants and eating houses open on both sides, waiting eagerly for customers. On reaching Dhaka, I went to meet a friend at his office, and he ordered a sumptuous hot lunch from a nearby take-home joint. When I described my bus journey he seemed troubled by the fact that the food might not have been very appropriate for me, but I assured him that it had not made me sick. He said people of other religions should be allowed to visit Mecca to see what a madly rushed place it is; many people do not know the rituals, and when it is time to visit the sanctum sanctorum, men and women surge forward without regard for age or sex and you could even lose your clothes. But one visit is essential for a Muslim to remain in reckoning in society. I said, 'It's more or less the same with us too, but tell me, how do people like you and me become fundamentalists?' He only shrugged. Incidentally, I am told that segregated paths have now been provided for men and women at the Kaaba in Mecca.

## ***Not Knowing What Is Kosher***

I had been to Jerusalem with my wife twenty-seven years ago. The city was a fortress then. I stood at the Wailing Wall behind a guard rail and saw battle-hardened Jews crying at the Wall. Most of them doing so were dressed in long black robes and hats,

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and I had no way of knowing whether they were clerics or ordinary people dressed for the occasion. There were of course some ordinarily dressed people, but they were not crying as much and not reading from the small books; they could have been tourists. The crying seemed to be sincere, and the thought crossed my mind that we Hindus never cry at Somnath or Pushkar in India or at the Dhakeshwari or Chatteshwari temples in Bangladesh. Is that right? And why don't we cry? Some time later, we found Muslims silently entering the mosque above in a queue guarded by machine-gun-toting Israeli militia. The azan was not to be heard.

We went to Via Dolorosa, a very narrow street crowded in on both sides by Arab shops, much narrower than what it was when Christ passed through it on his way to Calvary—if one is to trust the Hollywood movies. There were people of all types there but there wasn't much show of devotion. An Arab boy ran up to my sari-clad wife and kissed her on the cheek shouting 'Indian' with a lot of joy. She was so startled that it took her quite some time to recover.

We went to a small Israeli restaurant run by an elderly mother and her young daughter. We ordered kosher lamb and it was delicious. Then we ordered coffee with milk. The girl who was serving us came back with a twisted face, saying, 'Mum says you cannot have coffee with milk.' I asked why and she said, 'You cannot have meat and milk at the same time—that's our religion,' and again made a face. Much amused by now, I said, 'We can wait; how long should we wait before we can have the milk?' She again made a face, said, 'Don't know really, old people know it,' and pointed her chin at her mother. She was visibly upset at having to refuse something to guests from another culture who did not know hers.

In 2006, I was again in Jerusalem. The Wailing Wall had become the Western Wall of Solomon's Temple and there was no crying. Instead, there were prayers written in small slips of paper tucked in the crevices between stones and lots of festivities. The line of Arabs proceeding to the Al Aqsa mosque

was not to be seen (or was hidden behind the Wall). Everybody had become accustomed to the sight of Indians—no more kisses for us.

### ***Right Livelihood***

Talking of prayers, I am reminded of our old chauffeur who used to drive for my father and then for me. He had been a government employee most of his life, and after retirement started working for our family. He had seen me as a student and was my first teacher of practical philosophy. Many times, as he drove the car and I sat beside him, he said to me, 'Dada, remember one thing in life, never hanker after money that is not rightly yours. Such money does not last and does not bring happiness.' In fact, he repeated this statement so many times that I still hear him repeating it. He had four sons and lived in a single rented room. His wife lived in the village tending the small plot of land to produce part of the rice the family needed, and visited him occasionally. His sons, even as they studied in school, earned their tuition fees by teaching junior boys, and the elder brothers took care of the younger ones. Using such piecemeal methods to educate themselves, one of them became a college teacher, another an accountant, and the other two sons also settled down in similar professions. The father could at last retire and go back to his village to till the land—he had by now used his pension money to increase his land holdings—and look after his wife and grandson. He used to visit us occasionally and was always found to be full of joy and satisfaction. Government drivers of his days were known to manage a few extra bucks, and he must have seen his colleagues do so, even as he vowed never to do that and stuck to his principle through thick and thin. He had had very little formal education and had no knowledge of religion or philosophy, but he remained steadfast in his duty and in his principles. As for me, it has become a habit with me to judge every man I meet, big or small, against this gold standard of a man. And in this I am not a religious or cultural partisan, for I have found similar persons in other cultures too.



# My Notes on Spirituality

Dr Indira Goswami

I HAVE deep faith and belief in spirituality. In fact, without it, I feel human life is closer to animal life. For me, spirituality is not religion. It's a manifestation of humanity.

The younger generation, I feel, must be guided to remember the spirituality in their souls at every moment. The philosopher Radhakrishnan was of the opinion that if you become scientifically skilled but do not develop the other dimensions of your soul and do not believe that besides knowledge there are other things like wisdom, you will become a monster, not the master of your life. Mahatma Gandhi, a great believer in spirituality, has also said: 'In human society, all violence can be traced back to these seven recurrent blunders: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principles.'

Sri D N Malhotra, the initiator of the pocket book revolution in India and the proprietor of Hind Pocket Books, used to say, 'I think it is a basic nature of man to seek spirituality, especially in India. We have all inherited the spiritual tradition going back to time immemorial from our rishis and sages. But I believe that spirituality should manifest in one's action. It should not be just solitary meditation. It should serve human beings. If people want to seek God, they should serve the poor cobbler, the lowest, downtrodden men and women, in whom one can feel more of divinity than in the eyes and character of people with wealth. God resides in

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One of the pre-eminent contemporary Assamese writers, Dr Indira Goswami received the Jnanpith, India's highest literary award, in 2001. She is known for her empathic and compassionate handling of tough social issues.

the common man. Therefore, to serve the poor of our vast motherland, for me, is spirituality.'

Justice M G Ranade, in a lecture at the Prarthana Samaj, Bombay, said that the mission and message of the reform movement inaugurated by Raja Rammohan Roy was to 'humanize, equalize, and spiritualize'.

Again, it is spirituality that makes us love animals. Very recently, I read an article in a national paper on the great statesman and thinker Chanakya (3rd cent. BCE) whose fame crossed the boundaries of India and spread across the world. *Arthashastra* and *Nitishastra* are two great works of his that have survived to this day. In his *Nitishastra* he emphasizes some qualities that humans could learn from animals. From the lion one ought to learn perseverance and dedication to the task at hand; from the crane, judiciousness and restraint; from the crow, saving for future; from the dog, faithfulness; and from the ass, patience and contentment.

My conception regarding spirituality deepened when I was staying in Vrindavan for two long years—from 1969 to 1971. A wandering monk from the Himalayas came and sat near the bank of the Yamuna. I used to meet him in the early hours of the morning, as he was always surrounded by pilgrims and devotees at other times. I was passing through terrible times after the death of my husband, who was killed in an accident in Kashmir. He was only twenty-six years old at the time. In those days, my mind was in disarray. I felt totally sunk in pain. When I revealed to him the state of my mind, the half-naked monk told me in a very clear voice, 'Daughter, don't forget about your own death. Carry it in some corner of your mind. You will see that your sorrow will become tolerable.'

I could not understand his words in the begin-

ning. But gradually, I could understand why he told me this. This remembrance builds a kind of detachment in the mind which facilitates toleration and normalcy, freeing the mind of many evils, like attachment towards wealth. Attachment of any kind in life ultimately makes people unhappy.

I lived in Shillong as a child and studied at the Pinemount School. Most of the teachers there were European, and the Holy Bible was taught to the students in the school. The Hindu and Muslim students were, however, exempted. But my father wanted that I study the Bible too. The Bible influenced me a lot. I became so influenced by the life and teachings of Jesus Christ that I even began painting images of Christ and his disciples. The teachers liked the paintings, and they were displayed to the students of the other classes.

Later on, while researching on the *Ramcharitmanas*, several questions on spirituality came to my mind. I admired Tulsi's fine language and skill in use of metaphors. True, I didn't agree with his views on women. But that did not diminish my regard for Tulsi. R G Bhandarkar, the great scholar who wrote the famous book *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Systems*, wrote that Tulsi was a follower of the *bhakti marga* based on dualistic philosophy, with a leaning towards the spiritual monism of Advaita.

My father, Sri Umakanta Goswami, a reputed

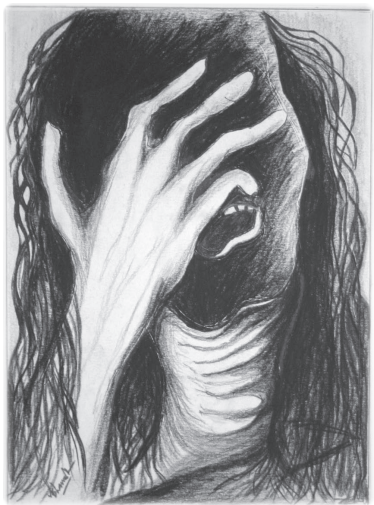


ARITRA DATTA CHAUDHURI, CLASS 5, AGARTALA

Faith

educationist who had a brilliant academic career, was an important influence upon me. Other great scholars whom I had read since my early life also made me think deeply about spirituality. C Rajagopalachari's *Gita* was one such book. I had read it in my student days. I find that its words are still embedded in my heart. In his introduction to the book, Rajagopalachari wrote, 'It [the *Gita*] is a book that tells men how to regulate their activities and their minds. It is like a railway guide. It is a guide-book for the journey of life.' The Quran is another holy book that interests me. When I was a student at Cotton College, Guwahati, I won a prize in a literary competition along with Abdul Hannan Chowdhury, one of my dearest friends. The prize was a copy of the Quran. I still carry the deep desire to read the entire Quran and fathom for myself its spiritual depth.

I stayed for some time in Japan in 1976. I read Yukio Mishima and felt that he was guided by a strong spirituality to write his masterpiece *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. I had read it in English, a superb translation from the original Japanese by Ivan Morris. I could feel the reservoir of spirituality in his heart, though he was like a samurai and wanted to restore the monarchy. Similarly, I was fascinated by two of my favourite filmmakers, David Lean and Akira Kurosawa. I feel that Ku-



ARGHYANEEL BHOWMIK, CLASS 7, AGARTALA

Despair



rosawa was also guided by the invisible spiritual resources in him. In his autobiography (in a chapter titled 'Darkness and Humanity') he writes, 'I learned not only the extraordinary powers of nature, but extraordinary things that lie in the human heart. ... It is impossible to even imagine the magnitude of the terror brought by the total darkness—it is a terror that destroys all reason. ... The massacre of the Korean residents of Tokyo was brought on by demagogues who deftly exploited people's fear of darkness. ... Seeing adults behaving like this, I couldn't help shaking my head and wondering what human beings are all about.'

I had read the poet Khalil Gibran closely when I was in Oxford for some time in 1985. I read his book *The Prophet* many times. He became the poet of my heart. In very few poets could I see such a powerful and deep sense of spirituality as in Khalil Gibran. This is why the critic Claude Bragdon says, 'His power came from some great reservoir of spiritual life, else it could not have been so universal and so potent, but the majesty and beauty of the language with which he clothed it were all his own.'

Khalil's poems decorate my thirty-years-old notebooks:

Humanity is a brilliant river  
Singing its way and carrying with  
It the mountain's secret into  
The heart of the sea; but you,  
My countrymen, are stagnant  
Marshes infested with insects  
And vipers.

In *The Prophet*, he writes:

When you kill a beast say to him in your heart:  
'By the same power that slays you, I too am slain;  
and I too shall be consumed.  
'For the law that delivered you into my hand shall  
deliver me into a mightier hand.'

And again:

Give your hearts, but not into each other's  
keeping.  
For only the hand of Life can contain your  
hearts.

And stand together, yet not too near together:

For the pillars of the temple stand apart,  
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in  
each other's shadow.

Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, former president of India, has made some very significant observations on spirituality, which were discussed in the journal *Purity* in August 2002:

'He [the president] believes it is necessary for people to be free in order to realize their dreams. Free, not just from foreign rule, but from all restricted energies, be they vested interests, negative ideologies and attitudes, or weak character. A country, even if it is politically independent, can never achieve its full potential, nor can its people find lasting peace, prosperity and happiness, if they remain in the thrall of the five vices, which are at the root of all social ills.

'Besides being free, India must become a developed nation, according to Honourable Dr Kalam. The first prerequisite for this is that the people of the country should have a positive outlook and self-confidence. ... We look only at the violence, poverty, and disease around us, ignoring the good that is taking place, and as a result lose all hope.

'The third quality that Dr Kalam advocates is strength. ... Prosperity without power is helpless, while power without prosperity is short-lived. Therefore, both must go hand-in-hand, he says.

'The foundation of all these qualities, Dr Kalam says, has to be spiritual.'

The human race is the highest and the greatest creation of nature. In my personal opinion, its greatest asset is spirituality. As I had already mentioned before, the words of the wandering monk from the Himalayas whom I came across in Vrindavan always remain embedded in my mind. His observation that one should never forget one's death is, I think, very true and wise. It helps one develop a kind of detachment from the material world and from human bonds. And to me, this helps us overcome the agony that often accompanies all forms of attachment. This is spirituality, and it helps us become stronger and nobler human beings.



# ***One Man's Journey: Applying Spiritual Insight to Everyday Life***

**Alan Croker**

**W**HEN one is given an insight into the nature of reality, into the nature or attributes of the Divine, one loses one's innocence, because one now knows that there is no other right way to act except in the light of that knowledge. To act otherwise would be equivalent to denying the truth of what is now known, and having glimpsed that truth, one can never deny its existence or reality.

Those of us who remain in the world and do not take up the path of the sannyasin or monk must find ways to integrate this spiritual insight into our everyday worldly lives. If we don't, we risk leading a divided, almost schizophrenic existence. For me this has meant a process of constant awareness and the application of certain principles which this insight has clarified.

## ***Acting on the Knowledge of Oneness***

One of the most profound principles which I now know is that all that is around me—whether it be animate or inanimate—is not separate from me. All those I work and interact with are also not separate from me. In my professional life as an architect and principal of my own firm, this awareness is a constant challenge. How do I reconcile those situations and people whom I see externally as obstacles in what I am trying to complete or achieve, when I know they are part of me? Are they simply cues to push me to seek refinement or a change in direction, or even to let go of the objectives altogether? Over many years I have found that those things which

annoy or irritate me, particularly with regard to colleagues or staff—and even printers who refuse to cooperate when trying to meet a deadline—have actually been some of my greatest teachers.

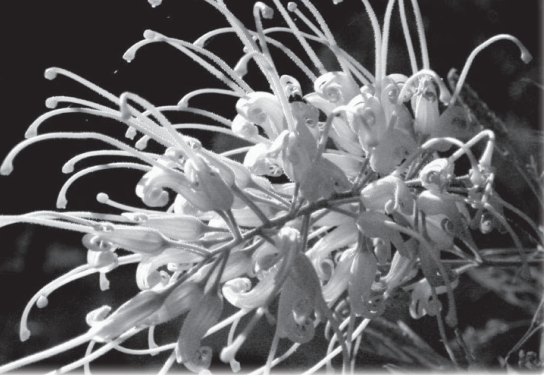
My initial reaction when confronted by annoying situations or behaviour patterns may have been to react, but I have since learned to apply first patience and then observation. Is this annoyance or behaviour (such as impatience or lack of focus) expressed by the other person something that I am completely free of, and do I thus have a right to reprimand or demand correction? Am I any different or better than him or her? Is my reaction simply a recognition or reaction to a part of myself which is not yet fully resolved or assimilated? After such reflection, I often find it difficult to become angry or annoyed with the behaviour of others, as my reaction is more one of recognition of that part of myself in them, and hence I am able to express empathy, patience, and, I hope, tolerance. I must admit, however, that the printer has not yet received the same degree of empathy—that still requires further work.

In such situations, particularly with staff, any attempt on my part to try to improve or resolve difficult situations involves sharing our concerns and working on the problem together. That is not to say that there is not some level of annoyance or frustration, but that this is also directed in some part at those same attributes within myself. I often find myself prefacing any comment or criticism on the behaviour of others, such as in a staff review session, with comments such as 'I know I am often distracted in my own focus on a particular task, but it is something we must try to improve ...'

Another important principle I have learned, and

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Mr Alan Croker is an architect with special interest in conservation practices, traditional building technology, and related issues. He lives in Chippendale, New South Wales.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN CROKER



*Rhythm in  
nature and  
architecture*

this is related to the last one, is to accept what one has been given. Regardless of what my aspirations and plans might be, I know that I will be given what I am meant to have—nothing more and nothing less—and that in order to accept this and be happy with it, I must let go of expectations. I have learned on many occasions that if I expect or anticipate something, I am likely to be disappointed. So now I act but try to anticipate nothing, and whatever arises is a gift. With this attitude I have found a wonderful flexibility and sense of freedom, a flexibility to change course at a moment's notice, to respond quickly to whatever opportunity has been presented. Even a difficult project is a gift, something to develop or test one's resolve, knowledge, and skill.

### ***Seeking Perfection in an Imperfect World***

Being an architect, I tend to strive for the perfect, or at least the best solution. In many traditional societies, the pursuit of excellence and perfection was always there, but it was accompanied by the knowledge that true or ultimate perfection cannot be achieved in this world, that only He can achieve that. For us, as embodied beings, to assume that we can achieve perfection would be an act of supreme arrogance. Hence, in many traditional buildings there is one element which is deliberately left unfinished, to acknowledge that only the Absolute can achieve perfection.

In designing a building, or even a small detail, my aim is always to find a solution which best fits the objectives of the brief, which best answers the purpose, and which is also a thing of beauty. Now what is beauty? For me, beauty is a quality which is measured by degrees—it is the degree to which any

object, person, or action reflects the true nature of its divine origin. This reflection can take any form, but the more clearly it reveals its original nature, the attributes of the Divine, the more beautiful it is. This can be in terms of order, proportion, balance, colour, clarity, form, function, integrity, rhythm, harmony, and other such qualities. But there is a twist to this pursuit of beauty.

At the core of Advaita Vedanta philosophy is the knowledge that every atom in the cosmos is only a reflection of Brahman. How, then, can one be more beautiful than another—as all are equal? However, in this transactional world, it is our nature to try at all times to honour the Absolute with our best, our finest endeavours. Thus we Vedantins try to offer or create our best whenever possible. But we must also recognize and acknowledge that that which is imperfect, which is not necessarily beautiful, is also He.

How do we embrace this principle? Clearly, the imperfect—the non-beautiful—and the beautiful have an equal right to exist. Every morning when I collect flowers to place on my small shrine, I seek out those which are fresh and perfect, which have no blemishes; but every so often a four- rather than five-petalled frangipani will present itself, or one with a red streak or a malformed petal. Are these to be rejected? Clearly damaged or dirty flowers will not be selected, but those that are merely different? Just as the tree does not reject these non-conforming flowers, I also cannot reject them: they also have the right to adorn His shrine. In fact, they are already doing that.

I have learned that to surrender to the will of the Absolute is not an act of giving up one's power or purpose, but can be an act of empowering one's

## Beauty of the Ganga

One cannot appreciate the beauty of the banks of our Ganga, unless one is returning from foreign countries and entering the river by its mouth at Diamond Harbour. That blue, blue sky, containing in its bosom black clouds, with golden-fringed whitish clouds below them, underneath which clumps of cocoanut and date palms toss their tufted heads like a thousand chowries, and below them again is an assemblage of light, deep, yellowish, slightly dark, and other varieties of green massed together—these being the mango, lichi, blackberry, and jack-fruit trees, with an exuberance of leaves and foliage that entirely hide the trunk, branches, and twigs—while, close by, clusters of bamboos toss in the wind, and at the foot of all lies that grass, before whose soft and glossy surface the carpets of Yarkand, Persia, and Turkistan are almost as nothing—as far as the eye can reach that green, green grass looking as even as if some one had trimmed and pruned it, and stretching right down to the edge of the river—as far down the banks as where the gentle waves of the Ganga have submerged and are pushing

playfully against, the land is framed with green grass, and just below this is the sacred water of the Ganga. And if you sweep your eye from the horizon right up to the zenith, you will notice within a single line such a play of diverse colours, such manifold shades of the same colour, as you have witnessed nowhere else. ... I tell you one thing—if you want to enjoy the beauty of Gangetic scenery, enjoy it to your heart's content now, for very soon the whole aspect will be altered. In the hands of money-grabbing merchants, everything will disappear. In place of that green grass, brick kilns will be reared and burrow-pits for the brickfields will be sunk. Where, now, the tiny wavelets of the Ganga are playing with the grass, there will be moored the jute-laden flats and those cargo-boats; and those variegated colours of cocoanuts and palms, of mangoes and lichis, that blue sky, the beauty of the clouds—these you will altogether miss hereafter; and you will find instead the enveloping smoke of coal, and standing ghostlike in the midst of that smoke, the half-distinct chimneys of the factories!


*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 7.303–04*

life. It is an act of handing the steering to that Atman within, though in order to go anywhere still requires our individual effort and action. We are nothing but instruments in His hands, but unless we surrender to His will, these instruments may be misdirected and not used to their best effect or for the benefit of all. I have found that continued study of great texts such as the Upanishads and Bhagavadgita, and the lives of the great teachers and saints, provides me with timely guidance and inspiration on this path, and I try to attend regular classes on these subjects. Here in Sydney we are particularly blessed with ready access to the great lineage of spiritual teachers, particularly those of the Vedanta Centre.

For me, pursuing the spiritual path but acting as an architect in this world is like walking a tightrope, a knife-edge between those principles which apply to the manifest world, the world of change and decay, and those which transcend it. My aim is to find ways to enact those transcendent principles in the

manifest world as much as I am able to, not ignoring them and dealing only with the easy ones.

The principle of interacting with the world as though it were part of oneself is fundamental for me. How can I contemplate damaging or polluting the environment, cutting down a tree, or wilfully creating something ugly, when I know that to do so will also damage me? Before one acts, one must first understand and weigh the consequences of the action, and only act when these consequences are ultimately positive. I believe that the modern perception of the world and the environment as the 'other' is one of the root causes of the massive environmental damage now being witnessed throughout the world. It is also a primary cause of our inhumanity towards our fellow human beings.

Regardless of its negative aspects, this cosmos is a truly extraordinary dance—creation—appearance, and I am so grateful that I have been given this life to participate in it and to understand at least a small part of the Absolute through it. 



# Selfless People

Dr Liliana Malkova

**I**N the Second World War, half of European Russia was occupied by German troops. Many families still remember the cruelty they and their forbears experienced at the hands of the invading army. In those trying times, there were many people who came forward in a spirit of sacrifice to help and save others. Here, we present some incidents of such selfless service related by members of the Ramakrishna Society Vedanta Centre, Moscow.

*Vladimir Preshepa* · The Nazis killed more than seven million people in Soviet Russia. The victims were of different national groups. But Jews constituted a special target for them, being declared a 'lower race' fit only to be totally exterminated. People were punished and tortured for rendering any help to Jews, yet they tried to do whatever they could. In the small town of Olshany, now in Ukraine, the Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews had been living together in a friendly way before the German occupation. There were two neighbouring families—a Russian family, Ostapenko, his wife Agafya, and their sixteen-year-old daughter Katherina; and a Jewish one, David Zelyk, his son, and daughter Rufina who was a schoolmate of Katherina.

In April 1942, the Germans decided to drive the Jews out of their houses and force them into a ghetto. Seeing the Zelyk family in the street, Agafya Ostapenko ran out to them and, risking her life, snatched young Rufina from the Germans. The girl was first hidden in their house; later Ostapenko took her with his own daughter to the forest, where a shelter was built for them. For two long years, while Rufina was in hiding, the members of this Russian family put their own lives at risk. By 1944, when the Soviet army drove the Germans

out of that territory, Rufina was the only member of the Zelyk family who was still living. And that was only through the selfless service of her Russian neighbour Ostapenko.

*Katya* · When my mother's brother was about twenty years old, he and his relatives were driven from their native Russian town to a concentration camp in Germany. The Germans took them in a railway van meant for animal transport. In the camp they had to labour from early morning to late night and were fed rotten vegetables and garbage. Poor food and hard work made them weak and ill, making them useless for the Nazis. German doctors would examine the prisoners; those who were considered incapable for work were transferred to a special sector where they were burnt alive in furnaces.

When my uncle fell ill, it was clear that the soldiers would execute him. But the doctor who examined him took pity on him, hid him, and started treating him. The doctor put his own life at risk to do this—it was strictly prohibited to help such 'non-Aryans', who were to be treated as animals. But the doctor proved himself to be a noble man with a kind heart.

The Russian victory over Germany in 1945 brought an end to the war, but hatred for the Germans still lived in the hearts of many Russians. They couldn't forget the atrocities committed during the German occupation. My uncle would often gratefully recall his experience, and would tell people about the German doctor who saved his life. He understood that evil does not depend on nationality, that the real victory over evil and violence must occur in the human heart.

*Vitaliy* · A young woman named Dusya lived with her son Vanya in a remote village. During her childhood, she had once lost her way in the forest


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in winter. Her hands and feet had become frozen, and were afterwards amputated. So from her childhood, she was handicapped. She and her son lived in poverty and often had nothing to eat. Neither relatives nor neighbours helped them.

An old lady from another village came to know about Dusya and Vanya. She lived alone, as her grown-up children had their own families and lived separately. So she invited Dusya and Vanya to stay with her, as her own people. Vanya was mentally handicapped, and had been badly treated at school, being overage for his class. He moved to another school, where the teachers and students helped him; then he started to improve in his studies. The old lady took care of the mother and child, and Vanya called her grandma.

This story was covered on national television over the last few years. People from all over the country started to help them financially; the small pension of the old lady had been the only income for the three of them. Now they live comfortably.

*Lena B* · Two houses in a Russian village burned down—two families were left without shelter. One had two children and the other eight. They appealed to a local Christian priest, who informed some friends in Moscow. The result was that Muscovites supplied them with all they needed. When news of people in need circulates by word of mouth, those people usually get help from many people. They may not even know who are helping them. Most people are not interested in publicizing their benevolent acts. 

## Tolstoy: Fear not the Truth

**T**o the question: What must we do? I replied to myself: I must not lie, either to myself or to others, nor fear the truth wherever it may lead me. We all know what lying to other people means, and nevertheless we lie unceasingly from morning to night: 'Not at home,' when I am at home; 'Very pleased,' when I am not at all pleased; 'My respects,' when I do not respect; 'I have no money,' when I have some, and so on. We consider lies to other people, especially certain kinds of lies, to be bad, but we are not afraid of lying to ourselves; yet the very worst, most downright and deceptive lie to others is as nothing in its consequences compared with that lie to ourselves on which we have built our whole life.

That is the lie we must not be guilty of, in order to be able to answer the question: *What must we do?*

How can the question be answered when all I do, my whole life, is based on a lie and I carefully give out this lie as truth to others and to myself? Not to lie, in that sense, means not to fear the truth, not to invent excuses to hide from myself the conclusions of reason and conscience, and not to accept such excuses when they are invented by others. Not to fear to differ from all those around me or to be left alone with reason and conscience, not to fear the position to which truth will lead me, believing firmly that what truth and conscience will lead me

to, however strange it may be, cannot be worse than what is based on falsehood. Not to lie, in our position as privileged mental workers, means not to fear to make up one's accounts. Perhaps we already owe so much that we cannot meet our obligations, but however that may be it is better to face the facts than not to know how we stand. However far we may have gone along a false path, it is better to return than to continue to go along it. Falsehood to others is simply disadvantageous. Every affair is settled more directly and more quickly by truth than by falsehood. Falsehood to others only confuses the matter and hinders its solution; but falsehood to oneself, presented as truth, entirely ruins man's life. ...

I think that a man who sincerely sets himself the question, *What to do?* and in answering it does not lie to himself but goes the way his reason leads him, will have already answered the question. If only he does not lie to himself he will find out what to do, where to go, and how to act. The one thing which may hinder his finding the way is a false and too high estimate of himself and his position. So it was with me, and therefore a second reply—which flows from the first—to the question: *What to do?* consisted for me in repenting, in the full significance of that word, that is, completely changing my estimate of my own position and activity. —Leo Tolstoy

# The Gitagovinda and the Bhakti Movement

Dr Kana Chattopadhyay

INDIA is a land of spirituality. Indian society is based on spirituality, of which bhakti is an important component. The word *bhakti* is derived from the verbal root *bhaj*, which means 'to serve'. But this signification does not amply reflect the connotative depth of the term. In its profoundest sense, *bhaj* means to immerse oneself in the reflection of the Ultimate. Thus its source may be traced back to the Upanishads. But it was in medieval India that the Bhakti Movement, as it is popularly termed by historians, found a special expression.

The medieval period in Indian history is witness to the decline of the glorious period of Hindu rule, the gradual absorption of Islamic culture into Indian society, and, amidst all this change, a general threat of stagnation in both social and religious matters. It was at this juncture of light and darkness that a new wave of religious fervour was initiated by Hindu saints and sages as well as by Islamic Sufis. It heralded the revival of religious tradition, which had far-reaching effects on society. It is difficult to say which was the prior influence, but it is reasonable to presume that, as 'great men think alike', this new current of thought arose simultaneously in both faiths. This movement embraced all classes and castes alike. The Ultimate was sought by the 'twice-born' in their privileged ways and by the lower castes in their simple homely manner. Though the movement was essentially religious, it did have a great impact on contemporary literature and arts. As Jayadeva, the author of the *Gita-govinda*—the focus of this article—belonged to this period, a little more insight into the period is

necessary to understand the genesis and value of this work.

Jayadeva seems to have flourished in the twelfth century. He was born and spent his life in eastern India. As this region is part of the Gangetic plain, its fertile soil is always conducive to abundant crops. No wonder this was a land overflowing with milk and honey in Jayadeva's days. But the rulers of the province misspent the wealth, indulged in pleasurable pursuits all the time, and were utterly deaf to the cries and woes of the commoners and ignorant of the happenings in the rest of the country.

The Senas were the last lineage holding sway over the Bengal province before the Muslim rule. Before the Senas, the Palas had ruled this region, from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. During this period Buddhism was greatly popular among the common masses, though Hinduism did not die out altogether.

After Buddha's demise, his followers got divided into two groups—one believed in the primacy of the Buddha over Dharma and Sangha, while the other gave preference to Dharma ahead of Buddha and Sangha. A further branch sprouted from this latter group, under Nagarjuna's leadership, and came to be known as the Mahayana. A Mahayana sect known as the Vajrayana flourished in eastern India in the eighth century under the patronage of Indrabhuti, king of Orissa. One of its offshoots was Sahajayana (the easy way).

Before Jayadeva's advent, the tenets of Sahajayana were very popular in the eastern province known as Radha or Suhma. A branch of this sect came under the influence of Nityananda, embraced Vaishnavism, influenced it in turn, and came to be known as Sahajiya. This cult considers Jayadeva as

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its prime preceptor or *ādi-guru*.

During the Sena rule, Hinduism underwent a revival in east India. Lakshmanasena (1169–1206 CE) was one of the most important rulers of this dynasty. An inscription over the pavilion-gate of Lakshmanasena's royal court announced that the court was adorned by five gems—the famous poets Jayadeva, Sharana, Govardhana, Umapatidhara, and Dhoyi (called Kaviraja): *Govardhanaśca śaraṇo jayadeva umāpatih, kavirājaśca ratnāni samitau lakṣmaṇasya ca*.

The *Gitagovinda* speaks thus of this talented team of poets:

*Vācaḥ pallavayaty-umāpatidharah  
sandarbhāśuddhiṁ girāṁ  
jānīte jayadeva eva śaraṇah  
ślāghyo durūhadrute;  
Śrīgārōttara-satprameyaracanair-  
ācārya-govardhana-  
spardhī ko'pi na viśrutah śrutidharo  
dhoyi-kavikṣmāpatih.*

Umapatidhara is expert in magnifying sentences, Sharana in rapid composition of abstruse verse, Jayadeva alone knows the true import of words, and Dhoyi is known as the king of poets for his poetic ear; but none can compare with Govardhana in presenting the sacred truth in the erotic sentiment (*Gitagovinda*, 1.3).

The best gem in this court was undoubtedly Jayadeva, who himself eulogized his contemporaries in such apt words.

A close study of the *Gitagovinda* reveals a lot about Jayadeva's own personality. Jayadeva was born at Kendubilva on the sea: *kendubilva-samudrasambhava* (3.10). His father was Bhojadeva and mother Rama- or Vama-devi, and his favourite peer Parashara, whose voice seems to have been capable of expressing the poetic beauty of the *Gitagovinda*: *Śrībhojadeva-prabhavasya rāmādevī-suta-śrījayadevakasya; parāśarādi-priyavarga-kanṭhe śrīgītāgovinda-kavitvamastu* (12.22). He calls himself 'king of poets', *kavirāja*. It is evident from the following verse that Jayadeva's wife was Padmavati: *'Jayati padmāvatī-ramaṇa-jayadeva-kavibhārati-bhaṇitamatīśātam*; Glory to the keen words of the

renowned poet Jayadeva, the beloved of Padmavati' (10.9). Legend has it that Padmavati was a dancer at the Jagannatha temple in Puri, and that it was to her dance steps that Jayadeva set the outstanding tune of his lyric. The historians of Sena rule also inform us that Jayadeva belonged to the Vatsya lineage, and that he died in Vrindavan shortly before Padmavati's death.

Jayadeva believed that he was able to create this unique poem because the Goddess of Speech ever resided in his mind—*vāgdevatā-carita-citrīta-citta-sadmā* (1.2)—and because his heart was attuned to Krishna:

*Yad-gāndharva-kalāsu kauśalam-anu-  
dhyānam ca yadvaiṣṇavam  
yacchryṅgāra-viveka-tatvamapi yat-  
kāvyeṣu līlāyitam;  
Tatsarvaṁ jayadeva-pañḍitakaveḥ  
kṛṣṇaikatānātmanah  
sānandāḥ pariśodhayantu sudhiyaḥ  
śrīgītāgovindataḥ.*

His expertise in music, his Vaishnava devotions, and his poetic articulation of the principles of aesthetic love—all these the wise can joyfully glean from the *Gitagovinda*, the work of Jayadeva, whose being is one with Krishna's (12.21).

To the uninitiated, the *Gitagovinda* is an intense love lyric. Jayadeva based this poem on Vasudeva's amorous sports: *Śrīvāsudeva-rati-keli-kathā-sametam, etaṁ karoti jayadevakaviḥ prabandham* (1.2). This signifies that the poet himself meant it to be a love poem. But the introspective reader will be able to get the flavour of divine devotion behind the apparently earthly love between Radha and Krishna. For Krishna is divinity himself, and Radha the devotion representative of the individual soul. In the end the two merge in supreme bliss.

The poem was written in the days of the Bhakti Movement, and it is against this backdrop that it needs to be studied. When material abundance is unbounded, it brings about decadence and inordinate attachment to sensual pleasure, which, in accordance with human nature and the cycle of time, pall in due course and drive people to seek refuge in the Almighty. The Bhakti Movement was the



outcome of this process.

As is the tradition in classical Sanskrit literature, Jayadeva starts his lyric with a salutation to Hari (one of whose incarnations is Krishna), through the verses well known as the ‘Dashavatarastotra’ (1.5–16). Verses 1.17–24 also invoke Hari, revealing the poet’s deep reverence for him. Hari is the Almighty, surrounded by the solar halo; it is Hari who breaks the bonds of Creation and is the swan in the minds of sages (the swan being symbolic of the Upanisadic Ultimate):

*Dinamani-maṇḍala-maṇḍana  
bhava-khaṇḍana khaṇḍana e;  
Munijana-mānasa-haṁsa  
jaya jayadeva hare* (1.18).

God is elusive. To have a vision of the Almighty, one must undergo penance. One is tested and tormented before one becomes fit to be united with the Almighty. Jayadeva portrays this intense longing of devotion in his *GitaGovinda*. But the prerequisites for the pursuit of bhakti are simple:

*Yadi hari-smaraṇe sarasam mano  
yadi vilāsakalāsu kutūhalaṁ;  
Madhura-komala-kānta-padāvalīm  
ṣṇu tadā jayadeva-sarasvatīm.*

If your mind delights in remembering Hari, and if you are interested in his sport, then listen to Jayadeva’s words in the sweet soft love lyrics (1.4).

The description of nature in the very first verse skilfully portrays the hero of the poem. Krishna is the hero, and the very name suggests his dark beauty. So the opening verse speaks of a cloudy, dark sky, a forest dark with densely populated trees, and a frightful night—*meghair-meduram-ambaram vana-bhuvah śyāmās-tamāla-drumair-naktam bhīrurayam*—all symbolizing Krishna. In poems having the love-sentiment as their essential element, women are dominant; hence Radha is introduced in this very first verse, with Krishna’s father Nanda announcing: ‘*Tvameva tadimaṁ rādhē gṛhaṁ prāpaya; O Radha, you take him (Krishna) home*’ (1.1).

Jayadeva also sets the ambience magnificently in spring, when nature is at her alluring best. Spring is the season for enjoyment. The following verse aptly

sums up the entire setting:

*Unmilan-madhu-gandha-lubdha-madhupa-  
vyādhūta-cūtāṅkura-  
krīḍat-kokila-kākalī-kalakalair-  
udgīrṇa-karṇajvarāḥ;  
Nīyante pathikair kathamkathamapi  
dhyānāvadhāna-kṣaṇa-  
prāpta-prānasamā-samāgama-raso-  
llāsairamī vāsarāḥ.*

The bees are agitated by the scent of honey as mango buds blossom, and the sweet cooing of playful cuckoos pitches into the ears of travellers, causing distress; they somehow spend their days in intermittent contemplation of the joy of union with their beloved (1.36).

Juxtaposed with this display of playful dalliance is the plane of other-worldliness, of bhakti, and of ultimate surrender at the feet of the Almighty: ‘*Śrījayadeva-bhaṇitam-idam-udayati hari-carāṇa-smṛti-sāram*; Jayadeva’s song evokes the all-important memory of Hari’s feet’ (1.34). Worldly pleasure thus culminates in bliss: ‘*Viśveṣāmanurañjanena janayannānandam*; by pleasing all beings (He) generates bliss’ (1.46).

This ecstatic Krishna is none other than the blissful Brahman of the Vedas and the Upanishads. Krishna finds mention in the *Cchandogya Upanishad* (3.17.6): ‘*Taddhaitat-ghora āṅgirasah kṛṣṇāya-devakīputrāyoktvovāca*; Ghora, son of Angirasa, instructed Krishna, the son of Devaki, in the knowledge of sacrificial philosophy.’ This very Krishna has, in course of time, been transformed into Krishna, the hero of Jayadeva’s *GitaGovinda*.

In the third canto, Krishna first feels the tug of bhakti: ‘*Kim kariṣyati kim vadiṣyati sā ciram virahena*; What will she do, what will she say for being deserted so long?’ (3.4).

*Dhyānalayena puraḥ parikalpya  
bhavantamativa durāpam;  
Vilapati hasati viṣṇuḥ roditi  
cañcati muñcati tāpam.*

Immersed in meditation, conjuring up your distant form before her, she laments, laughs, swoons, wails, and trembles—thus releasing her mental agony (4.8).

This devotion is, however, not an abject surrender. It involves a personal transcendence and transformation into the Godhead. Even the Almighty bows before this power. Hari is forced to plead: ‘*Vimukhibhāvaṁ tāvad-vimuñca na muñca mām svayam-atīśaya-snigdhaḥ*; Let that aversion go, do not give me the slip, I am deeply devoted (to you)’ (10.14). It is then that ‘*Sphuritam-anaṅga-taraṅga-vaśādiva sūcita-hari-parirambham*; Hari’s embrace is felt in being gripped by rising incorporeal waves’ (11.6). The expectant union is then painted in touching strokes of the pen:

*Sā mām draṣyati vakṣyati smara-kathāṁ  
pratyāṅgamāliṅganaiḥ  
prītim yāsyati raṁsyate sakhi samā-  
gatyeti cintākulaḥ;  
Sa tvām paśyati vepate pulakayaty-  
ānandati svidyati  
pratyudgacchati mūrccati sthira-tamaḥ-  
puñje nikuñje priyaḥ.*

She will see me, tell me a tale of love, be pleased by my embrace, cheer up, and delight in the meeting, (says) the pensive (Krishna). He, the beloved, sees you, trembles, is enraptured, exults, sweats, advances, swoons in the arbour, a firm mass of darkness (11.10).

### The View of Scholars

A survey of some scholarly opinion on this lucid lyric would aptly complement our discussion. Sukumar Sen, a distinguished linguist and scholar of the Bengali language and literature, has termed the *Gitagovinda* a *nāṭya-prabandha* or, in modern terminology, an opera. He is of the opinion that apart from the songs, most of the remaining verses are superfluous. On the one hand the Sanskrit used is refined and fresh, and on the other a colloquial lilt (and use of the vernacular or *apabhraṁśa* forms) is apparent in the songs. Sen’s concluding comments in his Bengali work *Bharatiya Sahityer Itihas* (History of Indian Literature) are remarkable: He avers ‘that the final development of Sanskrit literature happened at Jayadeva’s hands through these lyrics; that the *Gitagovinda* was the last poem in Sanskrit literature and its songs the first in Sanskrit literature,

and that this work is the morning-song in Bengali as well as in all other modern Indian languages.’ It is customary to initiate literary discourses in modern Indian languages with the *Gitagovinda*. Above all, from the point of view of metre (*chandas*), the *Gitagovinda* is unparalleled in Sanskrit literature. Suniti K Chatterjee, another famed linguist and Sen’s predecessor and mentor, shared Sen’s opinion. He held the view that Jayadeva was the last (but not least) in the long line of esteemed Sanskrit poets that includes Ashvaghoṣa, Bhaṣa, Kalidasa, Bhātrihari, Bhāravi, Bhavabhūti, Magha, Kṣhemendra, Somadeva, Bilhana, and Śrīharṣa.

A few remarks made by the German poet Friedrich Rückert also deserve attention. He suggests that the description of spring probably reveals the poet’s place of residence. Rückert’s annotation of verse 2.8 is noteworthy: ‘The dark-coloured God, leaning at the Kadamba tree, soothes, in his worship, the horror of Kaliyuga, of the now corrupt worldly age; a mystical thought, which lies in the background of this shepherd-like love-play.’ In the previous verse (2.7) the distant beloved has already appeared before his yearning lover in a supernatural form. According to Rückert, verse 3.1 is the chief pointer to the mystical significance of the poem, wherein Krishna withdraws himself from earthly love-play, while he thinks of his true love, Rādhā. Rückert’s interpretation of verse 3.11 shows his awareness of some of the critics’ comments that in the wake of the Bhakti Movement there ensued friction and enmity among the Hindu sects—the Vaiṣṇavas, the Śaktas, and the Śaivas:


Why, O Love-god, do you show enmity towards me so sharp, so as to regarded me, the soft Hari, as the harsh Hara, that is Shiva, your enemy? I am anointed with fragrant sandal-paste, not, like Shiva, with the ash of the dead; I wear a cooling lotus-garland on my heart—not, like Shiva, a snake—and blue lotus flowers adorn my neck—not, like Shiva, the blue streak of poison, that he drank (when the gods stirred the milk-ocean, in order to get *amṛta*, ambrosia, terrible poison or *halāhala* came out as the topmost foam, which Shiva, being the bravest, swallowed up, so that it did not ruin others).

### The Legacy of the Gitagovinda

Jayadeva was an unrivalled lyricist. Though the *Gitagovinda* is written in Sanskrit, medieval Bengali literature is indebted to this immortal work. Two important strands are discernable in medieval Bengali literature: Mangala-kavya (psalms of praise) and Padavali (devotional songs by Vaishnava poets). The *Gitagovinda* is a combination of the two: ‘*Śrījayadeva-kaveridam kurute mudam e, maṅgalamujjvalagītam*; The poet Jayadeva joyously composes this bright and auspicious psalm’ (1.2.4); and ‘listen to Jayadeva’s speech, in these sweet soft lyrics (*padāvali*)’ (1.4). In the music world too, Jayadeva’s dominance has been unanimously acknowledged by medieval as well as more recent teachers. Bengali metres are beholden to Jayadeva. His influence is evident in the themes of later poets. Many commentaries have been written on the *Gitagovinda* and many a literary work has imitated it.

There are critics who view this poem as vulgar eroticism, but it is worth remembering that the lyric also reminds us—in every canto—that amidst the luxury and beauty of worldly nature, the ul-

timate refuge is the Lord Supreme, Hari, who as Krishna is the hero of this work. The erotic mood is an integral part of Sanskrit literature, but beyond this universal sentiment, the urge to attain the ultimate Refuge as well as the eagerness for welfare of society expressed through song is surely indicative of a pure mind and a magnanimous heart.

Jayadeva is first and foremost an artist. His lucidity and unique choice of words—a blend of Sanskrit and vernacular—his diction, his repertoire of phonetics, his metrical rhythm, his restrained wantonness and effusiveness are all hallmarks of an artist; and all these make his composition a work of art. His love for God is reflected in his description of Krishna’s amorous sport, which is simultaneously sensuous and mystical, a fine mix of devotion and emotional gratification. The very genre of lyric has been fine-tuned in Jayadeva’s poem. Both in uniqueness of thought and form, the *Gitagovinda* initiated a new literary style. Above all, the expression of divine truth by means of amorous sport and poetic sentiment has transformed Jayadeva’s *Gitagovinda* into an everlasting classic. 

**T**here are five steps in human love. ... [The fifth is] the love of husband and wife; love for love’s sake—God the perfect, beloved one.

It has been beautifully expressed: ‘Four eyes meet, a change begins to come into two souls; love comes in the middle between these two souls and makes them *one*.’

When a man has this last and most perfect form of love, then all desires vanish, forms and doctrines and churches drop away, even the desire for freedom (the end and aim of all religions is freedom from birth and death and other things) is given up. The highest love is the love that is sexless, for it is perfect unity that is expressed in the highest love, and sex differentiates bodies. It is therefore only in spirit that union is possible. The less we have of the physical idea, the more perfect will be our love; at last all physical thought will be forgotten, and the two souls will become one. We love, love always. Love comes and penetrates through the forms and sees

beyond. It has been said, ‘The lover sees Helen’s beauty in an Ethiopian’s brow.’ The Ethiopian is the suggestion and upon that suggestion the man throws his love. As the oyster throws over the irritants, it finds in its shell, the substance that turns the irritants into beautiful pearls, so man throws out love, and it is always man’s highest ideal that he loves, and the highest ideal is always selfless; so man loves love. God is love, and we love God—or love love. We only see love, love cannot be expressed. ‘A dumb man eating butter’ cannot tell you what butter is like. Butter is butter, and its qualities cannot be expressed to those who have not tasted it. Love for love’s sake cannot be expressed to those who have not felt it.

Love may be symbolised by a triangle. The first angle is, love never begs, never asks for anything; the second, love knows no fear; the third and the apex, love for love’s sake.

—The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 6.142–3

# Reflections on Calligraphy

Dr Amartya Kumar Bhattacharya

I AM writing this piece in the Muslim month of Ramadan. This is the month of fasting: from the partaking of *sehri* before sunrise to *iftar* after sunset. This is also the month for giving zakat more liberally.

To start with, let me narrate a visit to Murshidabad thirty years ago with my parents—an event that remains etched in my mind. My father took me to a mosque built hundreds of years ago and showed me all the details: the minarets, the mihrab, the intricate calligraphy on the walls, and so on. I was nine years old, and this was my first acquaintance with Islam. It was a memorable moment in my life. I have since visited numerous mosques in several countries and have especially been attracted to the calligraphy that I have seen in them.

Arabic, which has a cursive script, can be written in a number of styles. The highly stylized and formal Kufic and Andalus styles and the ornate Naskhi style are all vehicles for Arabic calligraphy. The Andalus style derives its name from Al Andalus, the Arab name for Spain. Even now the southern region of Spain is called Andalusia. The Nastaliq (literally ‘hanging Naskh’) style was developed in Persia and by Muslims in India.

The word ‘Arab’ (spelt ‘Ain’, ‘Reh’, ‘Beh’ in Arabic, from right to left) is written as **أَرَبِي** in the Andalus style, and **أَرَبِي** in the Naskhi style.

The practice of calligraphing the *ayat* (verses) of the holy Quran on mosques made them more ornate. The crescent and star symbol of Islam is also found in all mosques. But calligraphy is not merely decorative. It has a far more important role. By reminding believers of the ‘holy words’, it is an aid in

instilling devotion in them. Since calligraphy has to be read, it also helps spread literacy.



The Basmala—the first three words of the Quran

Hinduism, to start with, relied on verbal transmission of the four Vedas. It was only later that these holy texts were written down, as were later texts like the Bhagavadgita, the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, and still later texts like *Vivekachudamani* of Sri Shankaracharya. Palm leaves and birch bark were important media for recording these texts, and special attention was given to making the writing elegant and artistic. Sri Ramakrishna himself transcribed several Bengali holy texts onto palm leaves, as did some other Hindu saints.

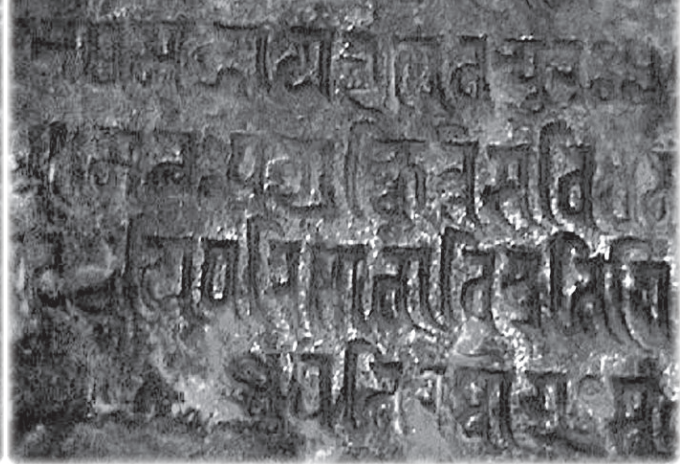
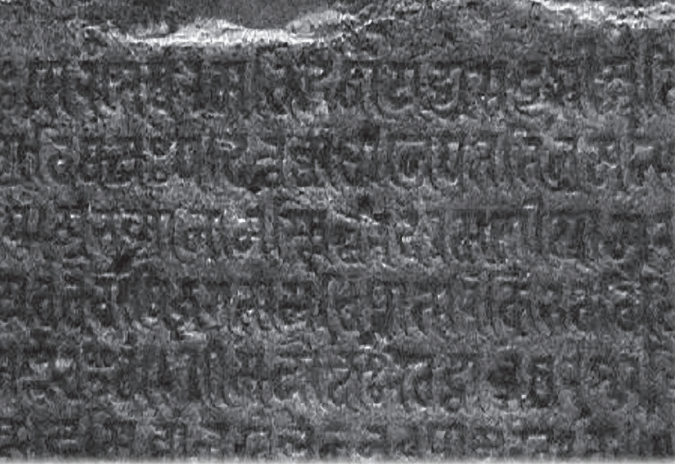
In Buddhism, the inscriptions of Ashoka in the Brahmi—the precursor of Devanagari—and Kharoshti scripts (Kharoshti, interestingly, is written from right to left, like Arabic) are well known. Buddhist inscriptions are found in Chinese temples too. Tibetan Buddhist temples are especially rich in religious inscriptions.

The traditional Chinese script, written in vertical lines (now modified into the modern Chinese script written from left to right), was also nurtured by several calligraphic traditions. Being ideographic—with characters symbolizing the ideas of things rather than indicating the sounds used to say them—and deriving its inspiration from nature (each stroke, even each dot, suggests the form of a natural object), the Chinese script allowed the development of a vibrant calligraphic tradition. On the other hand, the simplicity of form of the letters in Latin (as also such related scripts as Greek and Cyrillic), not only facilitated the spread of literacy

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in the West but also made writing ‘everbody’s art’.

Though writing developed several millennia ago in India, it was only an occasional practice to carve elaborate inscriptions of holy texts in Hindu temples. Several Hindu temples did have such mantras as *Om namah shivaya* and symbols like *Om* inscribed on the walls. *Om* occupies a special place in Hinduism. In fact, it is the symbol of Hinduism itself. Another symbol widely used by Hindus is the swastika.

I have had occasion to visit temples in different parts of India as well as in Nepal, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia, and in the West. But I particularly remember a visit to a temple in Kanpur built fairly recently by the Singhanian family (and known locally as the JK temple). It lies a bit off the main road linking the Indian Institute of Technology to Kanpur Central railway station, and is a very ornate architectural piece.

What made this temple memorable to me was the fact that while there were sacred images in the temple, there were also inscriptions of holy texts in Devanagari script set in black on milk-white stone all over the walls. I found devotees paying obeisance to the inscriptions as well as to the images. While the literate read the verses, their illiterate brethren who could not read but realized the sanctity of these words hoped to be literate enough to read and understand them some day. Gita temples have come up in Haridwar, Rishikesh, and other parts of north India. These have shlokas from the holy Gita inscribed on them. At the Vindhyavasini temple complex in Vindhyachal, a pavilion’s marble walls are etched with the text of the *Devi Mahat-*

*myam*. In several temples in Tamil Nadu, similar inscriptions in Tamil can be found.

But this practice needs to be cultivated more widely by Hindus. None of the temples in my neighbourhood have inscriptions on them. And this is true of the majority of Hindu temples. I would definitely have liked to see and read inscriptions of the *mahavakyas* like *tat tvam asi*, holy Vedic texts like the ‘Purusha Sukta’ and the ‘Nasadiya Sukta’, and passages from the Upanishads on the walls of temples. The fate of Khajuraho temples, I am sure, would have been different if they had had such inscriptions instead of the risqué ornamentation seen there.

Numerous Hindu temples are being constructed across the globe. I earnestly hope they will incorporate calligraphic inscriptions abundantly, and thus add to their beauty and grandeur.



**A distinction needs to be made** between symbols and calligraphy. The cross of Christianity is a symbol; drawing it is not calligraphy. Symbols are used throughout the world by different religions, and have elaborate meaning. The symbol of Sikhism, for instance, includes two swords, one symbolizing temporal authority and the other spiritual authority. There are, of course, secular symbols too. Communism, an irreligious ideology, evolved its own symbol—the hammer, sickle, and star. Calligraphy, on the other hand, is ‘beautiful writing’. Though much of calligraphy is religious, not all calligraphy falls in this category. Chinese calligraphy is an example of largely secular calligraphy. Religious calligraphy is probably best seen in the Islamic tradition, in which calligraphy is used to reproduce the suras of the Quran.



১। জায়েবাবি পদ্মোত্ত ববিস হনুমান  
 ২। পামেবুয় দিনটানা হুয়া ১। মাঝে বনিয়া  
 ৩। বাহা ১। কামাঙ্গ পেমিয়া বায়সবন বানরা  
 ৪। বানরা জদিহইল একমেনি ১। শিবাঙ্গ বান  
 ৫। চরান মোর এসত্ম প্রনাম জাহর উপা  
 ৬। গাহগুননিষি বন্যালে কামিবে কাম জামাই  
 ৭। কামনাআয় নামাম সিতায় পামচানমা ১।

Facing page: The 'Shiva-mahimna-stotra' is inscribed on the walls of  
 the Amaleshwara Shiva Temple, Omkareshwar;

This page: Puranic text in Sri Ramakrishna's handwriting;

inscribed pillar at Kailasanatha Temple, Kanchipuram;

inscription at Mahalakshmi Temple, Kolhapur;

Ashokan Rock Edict, Junagadh;

Gita shlokas at Paramartha Niketan, Hardwar

(clockwise from top)





# ***Social Seismography in Indian Legal Philosophy***

**Dr N L Mitra**

*(Continued from the previous issue)*

**T**HE Indian legal system is presently going through several such social stresses. If law has to be used for restructuring Indian society—which is segmented into social groups by allowance of ecclesiastical legal reasoning in the private sphere of life—and if at the same time equality of social opportunity through constitutional legal reasoning has to be ensured, one would have to either design fractured constitutional legal principles or force the religious law into a uniform civil law. Maintenance of both legal orders with a purely secular line of reasoning would defeat the purpose of both in the same way as would purely religious reasoning in a secular system of law.

When two legal systems are forcibly fused into a uniform system, the first confusion arises with regard to the object of the legal rule. Consider the rule on marriage. In the ecclesiastical system, the objective of marriage was procreation of children. In modern secular civil society, companionship or camaraderie has overtaken the procreation thesis as the objective of marriage. So in a modern society, there is no reason for treating unisex relations between homosexual men or women in a way similar to that of religion-based law. The ‘choice theory’, which treats marriage as a civil contract, seems far more credible in this context.

On the other hand, attempting social equality by restructuring law and society may create a different type of problem. For example, the eagerness to have a uniform Hindu code might have caused insecurity in a section of society and disruption of

state by including religious groups like Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains within the definition of Hindu. Again, has the imposition of the Hindu Succession Act on rural communities had an adverse impact on the sex-ratio? The effect of law on social restructuring and social change has to be constantly reviewed and data collected to ascertain causal connections, if law is to undergo regular reform. Attempts to introduce uniformity of private-life laws in a soft state (with weak enforcement machinery) may create innumerable social problems.

The British introduced the zamindari system in India to change the feudal social structure in a way suited to them. In order to enforce the same they used tough differential power mechanisms according to need, sometimes even creating war-like situations. Independent India kept its promise to abolish zamindari, but the end result has not been uniform. Land did not go to the tillers. In different states the old zamindars have only been replaced by a new land mafia or landlord class. To counter this, a militant peasantry has also appeared on the scene. Social change often takes a bloody path.

Another argument on the issue of ‘minority concessions’ is that, by this means, a political and legal gap is created for minority compulsions within the democratic fabric of majority rule; and this allows minorities to turn to belligerency in seeking freedom from majority rule. This is a trap of European jurisprudence. If a democratic structure with equal opportunity and full entitlement to liberty is available to everybody, why does some race or caste or religious sect have to be constitutionally treated as a minority? An accomplished equality and non-discrimination is the key to democracy.

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The minority placard only demonstrates that there is a majority. If before the law there is no discrimination based on religion, caste, creed, or sex, why should one section of society be branded as minority? Freedom of conscience is available to everybody—to preach, practise, and propagate any religious faith. In the name of concessions to minorities, is religion given a back-door entry into constitutional governance? In a democracy, ground realities and practical expedients for political gain are always given importance, but should there be no wall of separation between the private right to religious faith and public functions of the state?

### ***Restructuring Society: A Complex Constitutional Promise***

The constitution of India accepted a fundamental philosophy of civil society: the right to equality of opportunity for all citizens in a fractured and diversified social structure. At the same time, the government is obligated by the constitution to provide additional opportunities to backward communities so as to create suitable conditions for the exercise of this right to equality. This is therefore discriminatory justice for the socially deprived communities. This is the most important national experiment of using law as an instrument for social engineering. The constitution provided for reservations in government jobs for citizens of backward classes. This 'pull-up' provision, sociologically speaking, is the first rule of exception to equality of opportunity. The second exception to prohibition of discrimination is the positive responsibility of the state to 'push-up' the backward communities, by making special provisions for their social and educational advancement so that equality of opportunity becomes a meaningful right for all citizens of the country alike.

All this is very reasonable. But after about six decades of following this line of action, we are unable to assess the impact of the policy of reservation and of special schemes of empowerment. Some of the consequences of reservation in government jobs are apparent: a 'creamy layer' has come up in the backward communities; there is a definite sta-

bility in the aspirations of the growing numbers of the younger generation of these communities. On the negative side, there has been a high degree of 'sanskritization' among those who form the creamy layer. This is seen in their identifying themselves with the higher social structures instead of trying to pull up others from their community, and in a small section monopolizing the benefit of reservations. Besides, there are unverified allegations of increasing inefficiency and cost of governance. Excessive granting of reservations, especially for a very long period, passing from generation to generation, may actually cause a reverse swing of the social pendulum and lead to social disintegration. This is because there is an inverse (interest-conflict) relationship between empowerment procedures and the sense of deprivation among different social groups. The intensifying struggle is evident in various fields, from higher education to women's representation in our legislative system.

A further difficulty is that, in a multi-religious country like India, if reservations are not undertaken according to a proper plan, well-orchestrated and monitored, the claim for reservation or concession does not remain a-religious but becomes a complex religious issue. In the first two to three decades after independence, there were not many claims on religious lines, but it was wrong to think that in a country like India there could be no classes comparable to scheduled castes or tribes among non-Hindu religious groups. Soon, however, new groups calling themselves Dalits (meaning oppressed) surfaced among Christians and Muslims, claiming reservations. The classification of backward classes is based on the 1931 census of the Government of India. The Constitution applies the term 'backward classes' specifically to populations classified as Hindu. The demand for reservations from other religious groups may require amendments to the Constitution. The problem has become further complicated by the fact that the government is presently not the major employer. It is, in fact, under pressure to downsize its staffing levels. So there are demands for imposition of reservations in the



private sector. Any demand for reservations in the private sector would give rise to counter-demands for concession. So as a compromise—a scheme for affirmative action—may evolve wherein counter-swaps like tax concessions or preferential treatment in government supplies may be offered to private agencies implementing reservations.

The other area of preferential treatment for socially and educationally backward communities is education. Here too, reservations in admission to government-funded schools and institutes of higher education has been the adopted strategy. In this case, the problem varies with different educational levels. Reservation in government-funded schools at primary and secondary levels is now taken for granted and is not contested. The friction and social tension increases when one moves to higher education. As the private sector plays a very limited role in technological, management, and medical education, there is serious competition for seats in these disciplines in government-funded institutions. Few privately run institutions attain to standards comparable to those achieved by the IITs, IIMs, IISc, AIIMS, or NIMHANS. So the stiff resistance to reservations from merit claimants needs to be viewed with fresh insight. Had there been a sufficient number of institutions available for merit claimants, the contest would not have been that stiff. Keeping in view the global demand for higher education, India requires a new vision in allowing greater private investment, including foreign direct investment, in higher education. The head-on collision between the 'merit count' and the 'category count' is both a material dialectic as well as an ideological conflict.

Complexities in modern society arise from widening conflicts of interests. Law as an instrument of conflict resolution has always had the structural limitation of definiteness, though the area of conflicting interests keeps growing. So we have a situation of attempting to resolve infinite complexities and conflicts through finite legal instruments. On the demand side there is a complex and growing demand for legal instruments (instruments helping rational exercise in decision-making). There would have been

no problem on the supply side had there been a positive top-down system for delivery of legal instruments derived from religious or sovereign authority or from academia. But in a democracy, people want to have the good feeling of participating at all levels of governance; and law-making is no exception!

### ***Not Law, Concern for Justice a Higher Priority***

Law in popular perception is policeman's or gunman's law.<sup>29</sup> Sixty per cent of the people stopping at a crossroads red light would say that they stopped because there are police to oversee. Some people argue that in India, enforcement of law is very poor because the enforcement mechanism is either absent or inefficient. There is very little of law as self-regulation. This generally happens when people have no role or a very negligible role in law-making, and such has been the case in India for hundreds of years. Law as an instrument of social order is not a matter of importance in the life and living of common Indians, because law has always been used against them. Instead, justice has become the catchword ever since public interest litigation was given primacy in delivering justice.

The constitution of India has had its highs and lows in terms of functional philosophy. For the better part of the last fifty-five years of our constitutional history, there has been much romantic thinking on equality. This is especially seen in the Forty-second Amendment introducing socialism as one of the defining elements of the Constitution and the Forty-fourth Amendment not undoing it. So it may be argued that, on the issue of socialism, all political parties hold a similar opinion. Now can it be denied that equality is the fundamental feature of socialism? In socialism, justice is not what is at stake, what is wanted is equality. But justice is important in a society with unequal structures. If economic inequality prevails, one would talk about economic justice. If social inequality exists, social justice is an issue. Justice is discriminative when discrimination is essential to provision of justice. So when one talks about justice, one is arguing on the

premise that the social structure is and shall remain unequal. Capitalism thrives on the basic premise that there is bound to be inequality of income and income distribution. Only then can one construct a theory of savings and investments with scales of monetary and fiscal incentives and disincentives. In such a social structure, one can have economic policies operating with Pareto-optimality. John Rawls identified two principles of justice: First, each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others. Second, social and economic inequalities are to be so arranged that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.<sup>30</sup> The first principle is now widely used to examine the correlation between the standard of human rights observance in a country and its democratic and developmental status. It may be further extended to the correlation between adherence to fundamental principles of individual freedom and the enforcement of the rule of law. But it would be wrong to think that a country can impose itself on another country (known for violation of civil liberty) on the plea of universalizing human rights.

Rawls argues that social inequality must not prevent any person from holding any position of authority or office of command, which must be accessible to all. The constitution must ensure this accessibility. In India, it is a fundamental policy to increase accessibility by reservations in admission to educational institutions and public offices. In the US, this is done not through a constitutional mandate but by the political policy of governance through affirmative action. For instance, incentives are provided to educational institutions for admitting students from socially and economically underprivileged sections of society.

In a society which has equality of income and uniform income distribution, there is no need to seek economic justice. Only when income is not equally distributed can one argue for economic justice and issues of equal payment for equal work, minimum wages, social security, and so on.

The constitution of India only grants 'equality before the law' and 'equal protection of the law'. It accepts the ground reality of inequality—economic, social, and political. To what extent does the state have a positive role in providing justice through its social and economic policies? The Constitution has a few guiding principles for directing state policy.<sup>31</sup> These include (i) all citizens—men and women equally—should be provided opportunity for adequate means of livelihood, (ii) ownership and control of the material resources of the community should be so distributed as to best subserve the common good, (iii) economic operations should not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the detriment of the common good, and (iv) men and women are to get equal pay for equal work. These principles of state policy speak of positive and substantial equality and not merely equality of opportunity. There is no provision in the Constitution for the state to own all resources and production centres of the country.

Given the huge diversity—social, political, economic, and religious—that India is subject to, justice, and not law, has become the primary concern in the process of constitutional function.<sup>32</sup>

### **Law's Power**

The external strength of law is provided by the three Ps: power, people, and politics. Law, after all, is a political instrument, which on the one side allows people to act and on the other legalizes the actions taken by the rulers to constrain people to act within definite limits. The traditional notion of law as force or sanction has, surprisingly, never been challenged by the ontological dilemma of existence: Is law a given (such as the laws of physics) or an imperative (as is the case with emotions)? Historically, law has developed as an instrument for making the exercise of power valid and binding. Without this power for sanctions, law becomes weak, irrelevant, and impotent. This is precisely the argument that has been put forward in favour of sanctions to combat such problems as apartheid and international aggression.

So, analytical positivist jurists have argued that the power of law as an instrument of obedience rests in the state or nation. Any geographical demarcation of a state as a political entity is based on the government having effective control of and commanding obedience from the people. Such a government is a *de facto* government, while recognition by other states only makes it *de jure*. State power is thus taken as a matter of fact, and its ability to command obedience is also tested as a matter of fact. Any attempt to establish this authority as a matter of law has only demonstrative value. The Nuremberg and Tokyo trials after the Second World War and, more recently, Saddam Hussein's trial undertaken by the US are examples of such demonstration.

Many positivists argue that such demonstration is funny and more exposes the weakness of law than confirms that law is after all a moral and ethical instrument, powerful and autonomous. Any act by an individual which questions the state is criminalized as 'sedition', and the law strictly and effectively deals with such political activity. Is the nation an expression of a natural and obvious bonding? Or does it depend upon the capacity of the rulers to command obedience? Is the movement in Chechnya a rebellion against Russian nationalism? Is the proposal by a Taiwanese citizen to make Taiwan the fifty-first state of the US an anti-national activity? These are essentially political processes, though law tries to deal with such issues as a part of complex social phenomena. While an act of terrorism aimed at killing innocent human beings can be easily termed a 'crime against humanity', how does one label sedition, or international belligerence, or such acts as 'not singing the national anthem' or 'not saluting the national flag' or acts of professing sectarian religious, linguistic, or cultural views that undermine the integrity of a nation? National law develops as a double-edged sword. Yet, law as an instrument derives its sanctity from the ontological enquiry into its relation with ethics and morality.

### **Dialogue between Philosophy and Law**

Law has both a body and a soul; the complex legal

architecture is the body of law and the spirit of law is its soul, its *raison d'être*. The former raises the issues of structure, procedure, rules for creating an even playing field, and the physical consequences of legal decisions, and the latter concerns moral and ethical issues. The former explains why law is, or is not, an ad hoc body of 'convenient' rules. The latter specifies why law endures. The former emphasizes prescriptions, compulsions, penalties, and sanctions, and the latter their acceptability, internalization, and socialization. Law thus undergoes a two-way evolution: one that globalizes law and legal instruments and the other that universalizes the course of human behaviour. The Hart-Fuller debate on law and morality goes to this very root of legal philosophy.<sup>33</sup>

Both *philosophy* and *law* raise questions pertaining to the physical and metaphysical world. Law also develops in accordance with historical necessity. At one time, with the 'command of the sovereign', it aided colonization and industrialization. At other times, law was used as a normative instrument for social engineering and social change, as in the abolition of the feudal zamindari system. One could also distinguish 'hard law', involving disincentives and incentives, from 'soft-law' as social awareness and an educational tool. Finally, law could overlap with economics, as several economic principles could be used as tools for determining the purpose and efficacy of alternate philosophies of law.

A body of knowledge can be called a system if it is 'systematizable', that is, it has a derivative structure, self-evident principles and autonomous axioms, and the definite possibility of being learnt and internalized. Such systematization would make a 'grammar of law', akin to the grammar of language, possible. Of course, that would provide an explanation for the possibility and existence of a rule, but it might not explain the conceptual development of the rule. The dilemma is one of 'body' and 'soul'. Grammar can only resolve the structural issues. But it is the 'concept content' that provides the understanding of the strength of the rule.

In the Hart-Fuller-Devlin debate, Hart concedes

the existence of 'universal values' in society. For instance, there must exist a rule prohibiting murder. Now, the complexity in the rule is whether abortion and euthanasia are to be considered murder. 'Concept cover' and 'the expression of the rule' involve intricate questions of container and content. Law is expressed in language; words are its bricks, and its expressions are the mortar. Nevertheless, in modern jurisprudence several rules of interpretation have been developed in the attempt to correlate law and justice. Thus when there are two possible meanings to a rule, the one that is beneficial to the participant is to be used. Again, the interpretation which remedies a mischief must take precedence over the interpretation that does not correct the mischief. Positivists argue that whatever is stated in law is to be strictly enforced. But judges, in their quest for delivering justice, always dip the law in the sauces of

life's experiences to put life into the dead words of rules and develop concepts on which theoreticians later go on to build theories.



### Notes and References

29. See H L A Hart, *Concept of Law* (Clarendon, 1961), Chapter 5.
30. John Rawls, *Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1999).
31. Articles 36 to 51, Chapter IV, of the Constitution of India: Directive Principles of State Policies.
32. The preamble to the Constitution secures to Indian citizens justice—social, economic, and political—along with liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, and equality of status and opportunity.
33. See, for instance, *Introduction to Jurisprudence*, 83; H L A Hart, *Harvard Law Review* 78 (1965), 1281, R S Summers, *Journal of Legal Education* 18 (1965), 1; and in R S Summers, *More Essays in Legal Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1971), 101.

## Law and the Citizen

Law is one of those remarkable products of the human mind which has inspired and impelled human activity from the first dawn of self-conscious endeavour. As such it is coeval with human society. Law has been the guardian angel of human civilization. The majesty of law is reflected in every step of the long road which man has taken from savagery to civilization. ...

But man is also the sovereign of law. He is the law-giver. The majesty and sovereignty of mind as law-giver is absolute unlike the majesty and sovereignty of law which is its product. If man as the subject of law (which is what civilized society means) is lofty and sublime, how much more grand should be the conception of man as the centre from which law emanates, revealing a being of vaster proportions than what the concept of a merely civilized man unfolds? But is man, then, an individual or a double? A complete philosophy reveals him as a complex entity, subject at one pole and sovereign at the other and any number of strands in between. ...

Law has various aspects. First, there is law as embodied in the codes and regulations of civilized society, its civil and criminal law; next, there is natural law, the regu-

larities, uniformities, and sequences observed in nature by science. Lastly, and belonging to a different category, there is the moral law within. The first gives civilization. The second gives science, and the third culture. ... True progress of man can be ensured only by a synthesis and coordination of the three elements. Restraint of conduct by means of external codes and regulations—what is meant by respect for law and law-abidingness—ensures the joys of civilized existence; knowledge of nature's laws through sciences ensures power for the further pursuit of the same joys, and of purer delights. But it is the deliverance of the moral law within, under the guidance and inspiration of a complete philosophy of man, that ensures true progress—the progress of man not only from savagery to civilization, but also from man as subject to man as sovereign. ...

The citizen is sovereign and subject in one. He is the highest product of social evolution. He makes laws and obeys them. Now for the first time, through the long travail of evolution, nature yields to one of her cherished products the true joy of living and functioning.

—Swami Ranganathananda





# Reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna

Swami Subodhananda

**D**URING my first visit to him, Sri Ramakrishna held my hand and made me sit on his bed. The Master said, 'You are my very own.' So he drew me to him as a person takes something that is his own. Then the Master went into ecstasy and began to laugh. We had a long conversation.



## First Meeting with Sri Ramakrishna

Subodh and his friend Kshirod first visited Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar in August 1885. They entered the room and saluted Sri Ramakrishna with folded hands. Kshirod approached the Master, who was seated on his bed, but Subodh remained by the door. 'Where do you come from?' asked Sri Ramakrishna. 'From Calcutta,' Kshirod replied. Pointing to Subodh, the Master said, 'Why is that gentleman standing so far away? Come nearer.' This encouraged Subodh to move closer. 'Do you not belong to the family of Shankar Ghosh?' asked the

Master. Subodh was surprised and said, 'Yes, sir, but how did you know it?' 'When I was staying in Jhamapukur,' said the Master, 'I often visited your home as well as your Kali temple at Thanthania. That was before you were born. I knew you would come. Well, the Divine Mother sends here those who will attain spirituality. You belong to this place.' 'Sir, if I belong to this place, why did you not call me earlier?' asked Subodh. The Master replied, 'Look, everything happens at the right time.'

Sri Ramakrishna held Subodh's hand and closed his eyes for a few minutes. At last he said: 'You will attain the goal. Mother says so.' He asked Subodh to sit on his bed. 'No, sir,' said Subodh, 'I can't sit on your bed. These are my school clothes. They are not clean. Moreover, I have touched people on the way here and my feet are dusty.' The Master forced him to sit on his bed, saying, 'You are my very own. What does it matter whether your clothes are clean or not?' After a while Subodh sat on the floor. The Master then asked his nephew Ramlal to spread a carpet for the boys, and he asked, 'How did you come to Dakshineswar?' Since the Master's loving care and affection had removed Subodh's shyness and uneasiness, he promptly replied, 'We came on foot.' 'My goodness! You came such a distance on foot?' the Master asked, surprised. 'How did you find out about me?' Subodh replied, 'I was impressed by reading your teachings. They are really remarkable. You are such a great man and so famous! That is why we have come to see you.'

These words brought on a sudden change in Ramakrishna's mood. With a humility that amazed the boys, he said: 'Ah, I am lower than a worm. Name and fame! Ridiculous! Really, I am more insignificant than a worm.' After a while the Mas-

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Swami Subodhananda (1867–1932) was born in a part of Calcutta where Sri Ramakrishna had lived with his elder brother from 1852 to 1855 after leaving Kamarpukur. Subodhananda's family owned the Thanthania Kali temple, and the Master knew them. Subodhananda met the Master in 1885 at Dakshineswar, when he was a schoolboy. The Master was very fond of his simplicity and guilelessness. He is known in the Ramakrishna Order as Khoka (boy) Maharaj.

This article has been compiled and translated by Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis. The section on 'First Meeting with Sri Ramakrishna' has been added by the translator for continuity. [The text is based on *Swami Subodhananda's Smritikatha*, ed. Swami Chetanananda (Calcutta: Subodhan Office, 2005); Swami Chetanananda, *God Lived with Them* (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 1997); and *Swami Subodhananda: Smriti-sanchayan*, comp. Abani Mohan Gupta.]

ter said to Subodh, 'Mother sends here those who will receive her grace. Come here on Tuesdays or Saturdays. Many people from your part of town come here on those days. Come with them.' Subodh said, 'No, sir, that will not do. My relatives will find out that I am coming here. Please tell me what you want to say now.' 'I cannot take back my words, my child,' said the Master. 'If I say I shall go to a certain place on such and such a day, I must do so in spite of rain or thunderstorm. Even if I don't like it, Mother drags me there. I have spoken those words, so you must come on Tuesdays or Saturdays.'

Subodh agreed, and finding it was getting late, asked leave to go home. 'Have some refreshments,' the Master said. 'It is not necessary, sir. We shall eat at home,' Subodh replied. 'No, have some sweets and water, and then go,' said the Master, and he asked Latu to serve them. When they had finished their refreshments, the Master again said: 'Your home is quite a distance from here; moreover, you are too young to walk. Why don't you go by boat or share carriage? I shall give you the fare.'

Subodh: 'I don't know how to swim. We can't go by boat.'

Ramakrishna: 'Then go by carriage.'

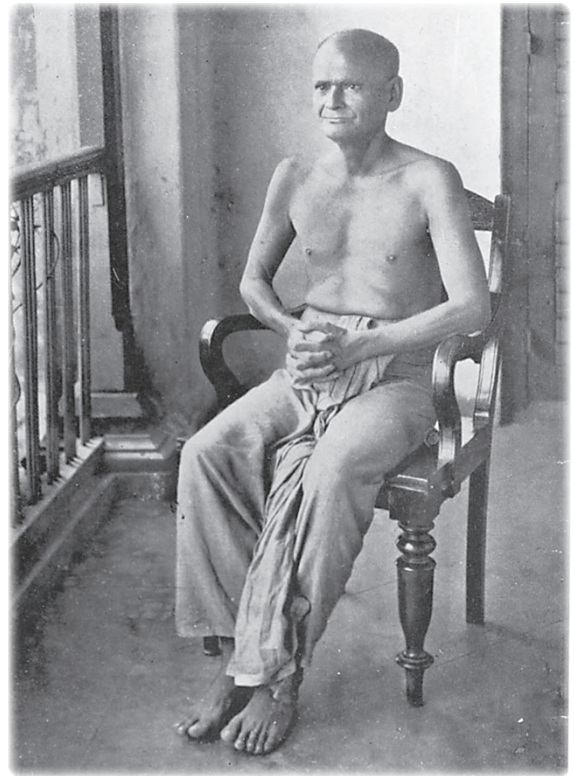
Subodh: 'No, sir, we shall walk.'

Ramakrishna: 'Look, my child, your feet will be tired from walking such a distance.'

Subodh: 'Sir, we are young [he was then seventeen]. If we do not walk now, when shall we walk? Moreover, you are a holy man; where will you get money?'

Ramakrishna (with a smile): 'Some people give money for this place. You will not have to worry about that. Please take some money and go by carriage.'

Since Subodh was inexorable, the Master said to Kshirod, 'You take the money and go by carriage.' But Subodh interrupted and told his friend, 'Don't accept the money. We shall go on foot.' Without insisting further the Master said, 'Come again on either Tuesday or Saturday.' Both took the dust of the Master's feet and left for home.



Swami Subodhananda

### Swami Subodhananda Remembers

One day while taking a morning walk, long after Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, Swami Subodhananda shared one of his memories with Sharat Chakrabarty: 'Look, what a beautiful sunrise!'

'Yes, Swami, it is beautiful indeed!' said Sharat.



This sunrise that you see is nothing. The day the Master touched me I saw many sunrises like this. I cannot describe how many larger solar systems, planets, and stars I traversed until I finally reached heaven. There I found the Mandakini River and took a little water in my hand and then sprinkled it on my head. I saw many divine beings, and the language of their conversation was half-articulate. Their bodies shone like pearls. They asked me, 'Hello, how was it possible for you to come here as a human being?' I replied, 'I am a son of that person by whose grace you are gods.' Those gods began to laugh. Then I came down but had no desire

to enter my body. The Master said, 'Please enter.' I said, 'Sir, this body smells. I am reluctant to enter it.' Then the Master took my soul and pushed it inside through the crown of the head.

When I was young, I was fearful. But when the Master touched me, all my fear disappeared.

The Master said that he knew who his devotees were before they came to him. When the Master performed the worship of the Divine Mother Kali, he was in a God-intoxicated state. While in ecstasy, he would call out, 'O devotees, please come quickly.' He would then pray, 'Mother, I want to see devotees of all religious sects who have reached an exalted state.' Eventually many illumined souls of different religious sects came to the Master. Then his own devotees came. He was happy to see his own devotees and was delighted to talk with them. The Master said, 'Afterwards, many more devotees will come and they will be spread out all over the world.' He also said, 'For those who will be inspired by the life and message of *this place* [meaning himself], it will be their last birth.'

I learned this song from the Master:

O Mother, your name is 'the remover of worldly misery'.

Your afflicted child is calling you,  
but you are hiding somewhere.

Mother, can you tell me what wrong I have done?

The Master prayed: 'O blissful Mother, saviour of the lowly! Your children do not see you, but please look after them. Please cast your gracious glance upon them. O Mother, this is my heartfelt prayer: May everything that is inauspicious become auspicious for your children by your grace.'

In his early days in Dakshineswar, the Master practised sadhana in the Panchavati and worshipped the Divine Mother in the Kali temple. After finishing the worship, he would return to his room and lie down, covering himself with a chadar. He did not talk to anyone. He only cried profusely, saying, 'Mother, do thou reveal thyself to me.' Then one day the Divine Mother told him: 'Why are you so worried? Look, here I am. I am with you and

united with you.' Saying this, the Divine Mother merged into the Master.

Hriday, the Master's nephew, told us: 'Once during the food offering to the Divine Mother in the Kali temple, I secretly stayed inside. I saw the Master talking to the Mother and holding the food to her mouth, as if she was eating. Then he said, "You want to eat through my mouth." [And he ate some of the food.] When the Master would perform the vesper service, he would sometimes stop and stand still holding the lamp. I would then take the lamp from the Master's hand and finish the vesper service. The Master would stand there motionless in samadhi.'

Once Mathur's servant was carrying tobacco in a cup with live charcoal on the top. The Master was lying down on the floor in ecstasy. A piece of that charcoal accidentally fell on the Master's back. It burnt through his skin and went deep into the flesh. After regaining outer consciousness, the Master said to someone, 'See what is there. Perhaps an ant is biting me.' This is real samadhi, when one loses body-consciousness like someone who is dead drunk. After visiting the Master, we learned what real ecstasy or samadhi was. Later, if anyone pretended to be in samadhi, I would prick him with a needle and that would break his samadhi.

The Master married when he was twenty-four. Most of the time he was in a God-intoxicated mood, and people considered him to be mad. One day he went to his father-in-law's house in Jayrambati. It is said that he went close to the house and then sat down outside of it. A passing villager thought he was insane. Later, the Holy Mother and others brought him into the house. After dinner the Master went to bed. Holy Mother finished her housework and then went to the bedroom, but she found no one in bed. Instead of the Master, she saw a blazing light. Holy Mother stood there with folded hands. When the sun rose, the Master emerged from that light and said to the Holy Mother, 'You have appeared in this form—very good.' Saying this, the Master bowed down to her. When she was eighteen, the Master worshipped her as the goddess Shodashi.



The Master had special devotion for Mother Ganges. He used to say, '*Ganga-vari brahma-vari*, the water of the Ganges is as pure as Brahman.' If anybody was overwhelmed with grief, affliction, or delusion, he would tell that person, 'Go and drink a little Ganges water; you will be all right.' Amazingly, the person would then be all right.

The Master's feet were extremely tender and delicate. He could not wear regular shoes. We had to place cotton padding inside his shoes so he could wear them. ... In the earlier part of his life the Master wore his golden amulet, but later he could not touch anything metallic. Someone even had to carry his water pot for him to use for washing.

I have seen something wonderful in the Master. His room would be packed with people, and they would have many questions in their minds. Yet in a single talk he would answer all of their unspoken questions.

Once Keshab Chandra Sen invited the Master to his house and secretly offered flowers and sandal paste at his feet. Then he said, 'Sir, please don't tell this to anybody or people will say that I have worshipped a human being.' But the Master's nature was like that of a child. He told Vijay Krishna Goswami and an official of the temple, 'Look, Keshab has offered flowers at my feet and requested me not to tell anyone. Please don't tell this to others.'

Sometimes the Master would say, 'The Divine Mother herself has come to visit the world in a human form [*meaning himself*]. When people of all sects assemble here, this body will not last.'

One day while walking in the Panchavati at Dakshineswar, the Master went into ecstasy. Then, facing the northwest, he pointed to himself and said, 'Look, the Mother is saying that the more a person thinks of me, the more quickly he will understand the highest truths of religion.' Again, pointing to the northwest, he said, 'I shall be born again in that direction. Then many people will attain knowledge.'

On another occasion the Master told me about himself: 'This body is a cage of flesh and bone, but the Mother is playing inside it. ... He who was Rama

and he who was Krishna is living in this body.'

The Master once told me, 'I was then possessed by divine madness. One day I was weeding the Panchavati. I was unaware that a beautiful young woman was standing behind me. Piqued, she said to me, 'Hello, sadhu! I have been standing behind you for such a long time and you have not looked at me or talked to me! I have visited many ashramas, and everywhere people are eager to talk to me and want me to live there. But you didn't even care to look at me. You are a real sadhu.'

Kedar Nath Chattopadhyay was a devotee of the Master. He worked as an officer in the Indian government, and his supervisor was an Englishman. One day Kedar talked to this Englishman about the Master and said, 'Sri Ramakrishna is God.'

The Englishman became anxious to meet the Master, thinking, 'If Ramakrishna is God, then he must belong to all.' One day he decided to visit Dakshineswar and asked Kedar to accompany him. After arriving there, Kedar told his Christian supervisor, 'You may not be allowed to enter the temple complex where the Master's room is, so please wait outside.' Kedar went to the Master's room but he was not there. The Englishman was waiting near the Bakultala ghat on the bank of the Ganges. Meanwhile the Master was returning from the pine grove to his room. Seeing the Master on the garden path, the Englishman rushed to him and touched his feet. He then exclaimed: 'Here is my Jesus! Here is my Jesus!' The Master blessed him wholeheartedly, touching his head, and gave him some advice. The Englishman understood what the Master told him: He resigned his job and renounced the world, then moved to Mathura-Vrindaban. He became a mendicant and lived on alms, and eventually he died there.

One day I went to the Cossipore garden house to see the Master and found him alone in his room. The Master advised me to practise meditation. I said to him, 'Sir, I can't do spiritual disciplines, such as practising pranayama by pressing the nostrils, japa, and meditation, and sitting in a particular posture. Please bless me so that I can have God-



## Even His Scoldings Are Sweet

Sri Ramakrishna was then put up by the devotees in a garden house at Kashipur near Chitpur for the treatment of his throat ulcer. Subodh would frequently skip school and visit that place. He would spend the whole day there and return home just before sunset. One day Sri Ramakrishna asked Subodh to write down a particular stanza of the song 'Sitapati Ramachandra'; he needed it. Subodh refused to do so, saying his handwriting was bad. Sri Ramakrishna insisted, 'However be your handwriting, just write; if it is badly written, so be it.' But Subodh simply refused to comply. Sri Ramakrishna

then said, 'Off, you fool, you seem to have spent your time only playing.' Subodh began to laugh at this reprimand. Seeing this, Sri Ramakrishna also began to laugh and said to him, 'I scolded you; did you not get angry?' 'Sir,' Subodh replied promptly, 'even your scoldings are sweets.' Very pleased, Sri Ramakrishna called out to others saying, 'O listen, listen, listen to what he says. He says even scoldings sound sweet.' He then touched Subodh on the chin in the manner of loving mothers kissing their children.

—Udbodhan, 34/12 (January/February, 1932)

realization quickly. If I have to practise meditation, why should I come to you? I may as well go to some other guru.' Smiling, the Master said, 'All right, you will not have to do all those things. But think of me in the morning and evening.' I replied, 'I shall try. I think of you as the veritable manifestation of God. Please bless me so that I can have direct experience.' Smiling, the Master tapped on my back thrice and said, 'Yes, yes, you will realize God. Afterwards, many people will learn by seeing you.'



*The following incident took place long after Sri Ramakrishna's passing away. Swami Subodhananda was then practising austerities in Hardwar, at the foothills of the Himalayas.*

I had been suffering with fever for two months. I was so weak that I could not lift my water pot to pour water into my mouth. One night when I went near the water pot to quench my thirst, I fell down on the floor unconscious. When I regained consciousness, my feelings were hurt and I cried out, 'Master, I am suffering terribly. There is no one to look after me. You didn't give me sufficient strength even to drink a glass of water by myself.' Thinking thus I fell asleep. Then I saw [in a dream or vision] the Master stroking my body with his hand; and he said, 'Why are you anxious? Don't you see I am always near you? What do you want—attendants or money?' I replied, 'I don't want either of those things. I can't avoid disease as long as I have a body. May I never forget you—that is all I want. Be with me wherever I go.'

Early in the morning I heard a voice calling from outside, 'Swami, please open the door.' I got up and opened the door. A young monk told me, 'Please tell me what you need. I shall beg food for you.' I said to him, 'I don't want anything.' When I asked how he knew about me, he said that he had arrived there a couple of days earlier to perform a religious rite at the Brahmakunda [in Hardwar]. The previous night Mother Durga had appeared to him in a vision and said, 'You will get more virtue by serving that sick monk in the cottage than by performing this religious rite.' So early in the morning he had come to my cottage and realized that his vision was true. Tears trickled from my eyes. I controlled myself and asked the young monk to let me live alone.

On the same day another monk received fifty rupees by money order. He came to me and said, 'You are suffering from fever. You need food and medicine. Please use this money.' I declined his offer. Early the next morning the young monk came again and told me that the night before Mother Durga had again exhorted him to serve me. Then I told him politely that I really didn't need any service and that perhaps Mother Durga had asked him to serve someone else. The young monk left. Then I prayed to the Master: 'Please don't tempt me anymore. I am glad that you have crushed my pique.' The young monk came again on the third day, but never again.



*As a young boy Swami Subodhananda was inspired by the blazing renunciation of his guru, Sri Rama-*

*krishna, and also by the latter's message of the harmony of religions. In 1897 he gave a talk on 'Sannyasa and Brahmacharya' to the Young Men's Hindu Association in Madras and included some reminiscences of his guru. The following are some excerpts:*

Sannyasa is the renunciation of all selfish motives and desires. Before I explain what sannyasa is, I should speak to you about brahmacharya; for unless the latter is realized, sannyasa or renunciation is not possible. The observance of brahmacharya requires strict regulation of one's diet, habits, and thoughts. Of all the injunctions prescribed for this stage, the greatest stress is laid by the scriptures upon the complete mastery of the sexual instinct. Nothing should be sensed or done by the aspirant that might directly or otherwise tend to arouse the animal in him or her. In this way one is directed to bring one's mind under full control. He is a true brahmacharin who is not a slave to his senses and mind, but on the contrary has made them his slaves. All the religions of the world preach this brahmacharya and sannyasa, both of which have one and the same end in view: namely, to lift the mind up from all sensual concerns towards God. When the mind reaches God it enjoys divine bliss. ...

Our Master used to say that if we want to pass a thread through the eye of a needle, all the scattered fibres of the thread should be brought to a point. Then alone can we make it go through the needle; if the fibres are allowed to point in all directions, they will prevent the thread from passing through the eye. Similarly, if we want to lift our mind up towards God, we must bring it back from all external things and concentrate it on one point. ...

Our Master said that just as rainwater does not remain on high ground but always seeks the lowest level, similarly, those who are puffed up with vanity cannot retain any faith within themselves, for faith always seeks the hearts of the humble and the meek.

As long as there are quarrels among different individuals and sects, they cannot rise up to realize the highest truth. When truth shines, the darkness of ignorance and its crew of narrowness,

bigotry, and fanaticism that deluge the earth with murder and bloodshed shall all vanish. 'My God is the true God, your God is false,' are the words of those groping in the darkness of ignorance. Once Keshab Chandra Sen, the leader of the Brahmo Samaj, asked our Master, 'Since there is only one God, how is it that there are so many sects quarrelling with one another?' The Master replied: 'You see, people always quarrel over their land, property, and other things of the world, saying, "This land is mine, and that is yours." In this way they divide this earth in various ways by drawing lines of demarcation to distinguish their respective property. But no one ever quarrels about the open space that is above the earth, for that belongs to no one, as no lines can be drawn on it to distinguish one person's property from that of another. Similarly, when the mind rises above all worldly concerns, one has no occasion to quarrel, for then one reaches a certain point that is the common goal of all.' When a man realizes God he cannot quarrel, but when he is below the right mark—that is, when he is distant from God—he is more or less given to quarrelling. However, although you may have many occasions for it, you can at last end all these disagreements by realizing universal harmony and agreement, which are only to be found in God, who is both within and without you.



**Humans can see God** if they give up selfishness, think of Him, and call upon Him.

Sri Ramakrishna told me, 'Humans can see God in the manner of two people sitting down and chatting, or two people taking a walk.' One needs to call on God without any ulterior motive.

Through His name the inauspicious turns auspicious, and peace comes out of peacelessness. One need only have faith.

All great God-realized souls, wherever they may have been, have stressed the importance of God's name. Sri Ramakrishna too would emphasize [the power of] God's name and say—rest assured—everything will end in good through [the power of the Divine] name. —Swami Subodhananda

# The Indian Artistic Heritage

Dr Prema Nandakumar



**The Cultural Heritage of India,  
Volume VII: The Arts, Part One**  
Ed. Kapila Vatsyayan

The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata 700 029.  
E-mail: [rmic@vsnl.com](mailto:rmic@vsnl.com). 2006. xxxvi + 1068 pp. Rs 1200.

OUR elders speak of *gaja garbha* (elephantine womb); and Kausalya held the incarnation in her womb for twelve months. Great appearances call for sustained, dedicated, sincere, faith-laden strivings. The present volume has been on the anvil for a long period, and Swami Prabhananda's note narrates the problems encountered in its making. These include four changes of the editorial guard, the difficulties in preserving scholarly manuscripts and rare illustrations, the dilemma of carrying essays which may have become outdated, as also the infinite care and diplomacy needed to get them all formatted to the final stage. If the titanic efforts have borne fruit today, it must surely be due to a sudden outpouring of grace from the Holy Mother. For her *matri-hridaya* could never bear the anguish of her children. So Kapila Vatsyayan, cast in the mould of our classical heroines, took over. We now have this massive volume made opulent by several folders of precious photographs as a veritable seed-bed for innumerable scholarly tomes on the individual subjects.

Kapilaji's task has been difficult: in selecting the articles, there was little space for innovation or for divergence from the thought-processes of the pioneers, who have all been eminences in their respective fields. To name but a few: Nirmal K Bose, Nihar Ranjan Ray, Stella Kramrisch, C Sivarama-

murti. To place the subject in the proper setting, articles on the interface of Indian and South-East Asian art had to be included. In Kapilaji's words, what we have now is 'the result of weaving together writings of the last seven decades on seminal issues of chronology, genre, form, style, iconography and relations with South-East Asia and Central Asia' (xxii).

There are four headings: Architecture, Sculpture, Epigraphy and Numismatics, and Indian Art and the East. None of these is clinically isolable from the rest. For example, numismatics is not simply about coins used in trade. This is evident in every page of this book and points to the integral world view of our ancients. Open the book at random, and you will never be disappointed. BN Mukherjee speaks of the Hoysala King Vishnuvardhana's coins with the imprint of Durga:

The two-armed goddess holds a discus and a conch. The representation of the deity is not devoid of artistic quality. The artist or artists concerned can be complimented for imparting to her well proportioned figure a sense of volume and lithe movement. It has been claimed that a fine image of the goddess in the Kappe Chennigaraya temple at Belur alludes to her popularity in the Hoysala territory in the time of Viṣṇuwardhana. The coins of the region and period concerned were thus not immune to the influence of the contemporary religions and iconography and perhaps also of sculptural art, the hand maid of religion (740).

With the coming of Islam, minting of coins took a great leap forward, as 'to a Muslim ruler the issuance of coins and the promulgation of his name in the *Khutba* (or public prayer) were indications of the establishment of his sovereignty' (ibid.). Thus it is a constant struggle for the writers to narrow

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down their subject and yet relate it to the overall cultural heritage. And most of them have succeeded very well in the task.

We open with 'Art in Indian Life' by Ananda K Coomaraswamy, surely a scholar's delight. Is art merely entertainment or is it utilitarian? Vain is such dichotomization.

The artist is not merely a copyist, one who records what he or she has seen. The figures in Indian art are not photographic reproductions:

The artist's perception of angelic prototypes is spoken of in many different ways: it may be revealed to him in sleep; he may visit an angelic world and there take note of what he sees (whether the aspect of a given angel, or that of the angelic architecture, or that of the heavenly song and dance), or Viśvakarman may be said to operate through him; these metaphors all implying an awareness at levels of reference superior to that of observation and deliberation—levels apparently objective, but in reality 'within you', *antarhṛdayākāṣe*, for as before cited, 'all these angels are in me' (10).

This brings us very close to the regions of meditative yoga. At the same time, one may not agree with every word of Coomaraswamy (the essay was written seventy years ago), as when he takes exception to the portrayal of the motherland as a woman: 'All that the nationalist actually voices in this emblem is, not a dedication to a Motherland, but service promised to the genus *homo*, species *indicus*, and sex female' (19–20). Actually, art using symbols seeks to blend the near and the far, and while remaining evocative for the present, it also seeks to represent all our yesterdays and all our tomorrows. Only then can we understand the Durga on Vishnuvardhana's coin, the *bhumisparsha mudra* of the Buddha icon, and the Mother Goddess from Mohenjodaro. Kapilaji applies the right viewpoint in this matter:

'The spirit and experience is perennial and the socio-economic-political is the ephemeral, time-bound and restricted. After all, "art" and all cre-

ative activity is meaningful only if it transcends the boundaries of time and space and can communicate beyond the immediate' (xxxvi).

Earth-rooted, but not earth-bound. Time is the ultimate critic.

Appropriately, architecture opens the roll-call of papers in the volume, with Amita Ray on 'The *Stūpa*'. For it is the stupa which confronts us from a distance, while the many-layered,

and multiple-winged temple or chaitya lies in wait for us, not unlike this seventh volume of *The Cultural Heritage of India*. We take off with the *Taittiriya Samhita* definition: 'It is a knot or tuft of hair, the upper part of head, crest, top, summit and also a heap or pile of earth or bricks' (37). After this, our adventure through a thousand pages is not unlike a visit to one of our huge temples (Patadakal, Tarasuram, Rameshwaram) accompanied by the awe and humility of the sacred spaces. The Vedic heritage, Buddhism, and Jainism have literally poured their life's breath into these architectural splendours. Who sculpted the Karle chaitya? From whence came the artists in stone to scoop out of rock the Udayagiri cave? The temple edifices built by the Cholas, Pandyas, Hoysalas, Pallavas, and Chalukyas. Time and fanaticism have tried their best to wipe them out, but have failed—such has been the tapasya of the original builders. K R Srinivasan shows spaces where gods must have walked on the earth watching the rise of the structures. How many types! What a well-developed techno-science covering every inch of building space! The *rathas* of Mamallapuram, Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, Sundaravarada Perumal Koil, Uttiramerur. The vision that led to the placement of stone or brick structures in the



Emperor Kanishka I  
on a gold coin



Amaravati slab showing  
stupa being worshipped





## Prabuddha Bharata

*Gajendra-  
mokshada,  
Deogarh*

midst of wide spaces is truly breathtaking. Kerala has its own architectural edifices, but unfortunately K R Pisharoti's 1937 essay leaves everything unsaid. Indo-Islamic architecture is well represented in the description of mosques and tombs built by emperors and chieftains all over India from the 12th century onwards.

The essays on Indian sculpture—which is 'a unique and distinctive language of plastic thought' (O C Gangoly, 303)—are a sheer joy to peruse. It is astonishing how the sculptors could chisel all the *rasas* on what is apparently lifeless matter, a piece of rock or a span of metal. The ability to bring to life the utter tranquillity of *shanta rasa* was possible only for the Indian genius. Gangoly is in raptures about the portrayal of Indian womanhood by the artists who worked with stone or metal. Speaking of a figure of Prajnaparamita from Java, he rejects the statement of a critic that she is like Venus de Milo and gives an insight into the Indian way of looking at things, an opinion that would have gladdened Swami Vivekananda:

In Venus de Milo, the Greek masterpiece of the great apotheosis of physical beauty, there is no conception of woman conceived as the mother, or even as the wedded wife, as the counterpart or reflexion of the Male Principle. It is instead the worship of the physical passion, hardly calculated to elevate humanity. Yet the face of our Buddhist goddess, radiant in her youth, is no less captivating

in the beauty and serenity of her physical type. She attracts, however, by a quality of beauty which is very remote from the Greek conception. She is the embodiment of a great spiritual energy—typified in a youthful body, incarnating not physical charm, but a spiritual power, the source of inspiration of her mate, the great Ādi-Buddha (316).

No dearth of matter in this world: ancient Indian terracottas; Gandhara art, including the world-famous Buddha images of Bamiyan which have been destroyed by fanatical iconoclasts; the rhythmic harmony and other details found in Gupta, Pala, and Sena sculpture as expounded by Stella Kramrisch; the contours of Hindu iconography explained in a crystalline style by N P Joshi; yantras; and equally informative essays on Buddhist and Jain iconography are but some of the material in this mind-boggling world. It is enriched by a lavish set of photographs. One hopes the captions are all given correctly. For, the Rama Temple's Sesharayar Mandapam with horse riders on the pillars has been described as 'Temple of Viṣṇu, Hall of a Thousand Columns, Śrīraṅgam'. Actually, the Hall of a Thousand Columns is on the northern side of the Sesharayar Mandapam.

Nearly one thousand years of Islamic epigraphy is introduced by Z A Desai. Written in Arabic or Persian, the epigraphs not only refer to the conquests and achievements of Muslim rulers but also give information about irrigation systems, the building of rest homes for devotees of God, demolition of temples, and trade monopoly. They also have to be considered as art pieces because of the calligraphy used in some of them. Nor need this surprise us. Ashok K Bhattacharya writes:

'In the words of the *Qur'an*, it was a direct teaching of Allah to mankind that the latter must learn the use of pen. ... Allah reminds the Prophet and his followers that the foremost thing Allah desired in man was the power to wield the pen. The most potent idea that motivated this desire was that it would guarantee the correctness of the text for all time to come' (786).

Having earlier been introduced to Tibetan ar-

chitecture by Lama Anagarika Govinda in a 1972 essay, it is now time for the last lap of this great adventure. So we go to countries which have never been aliens to the Indian child. One cannot ask for a better guide than Ananda Coomaraswamy as we move from one place to another: Sumatra, Java, Cambodia, Thailand, Borneo, Sri Lanka, Myanmar. Coomaraswamy's attention to detail is overwhelming, and his contribution is a regular book. History, architecture, porcelain, glazed tiles, weaving, embroidery are all here. And so is the close connection with India. On the Khmer art and architecture, for instance:

'Bilingual inscriptions in the South Indian (Palava) script, revealing a knowledge of the Vedas, Purāṇas and Epics, appear; the Sanskrit is very correct, the lettering magnificent, fully equal to anything of the sort to be found in India proper. Buddhist influences seem to have predominated in the fifth, Brāhmaṇical in the sixth and seventh centuries, but neither exclusively' (825).

When Lokesh Chandra unveils the contacts between India and China that have been going on for more than two millennia, it is quite an excitement, for he capsules his information in a breezy style. Chang Ch'ien, the envoy of the Chinese emperor, took musical instruments to his native land from India. India introduced milk products to China and received pears and peaches. Buddhist texts were getting translated all the time. The greatest Buddhist monk from India to spread his religion in China was Bodhidharma:

The tradition is consistent in pointing out that he was a prince of Kāñcī. His association with Tamil-speaking Kāñcī is confirmed by the Japanese form of his name: Bodai-daruma, shortened to Daruma. The Tamil form is Bodi-daruma ... The Japanese name *Daruma* goes back to an ancient popular name of the master. Moreover, the tradition that the doctrine was transmitted from Mahākāśyapa to Bodhidharma appears to have a basis. It seems that the modern Kacchapeśvara Temple at Kāñcī was a Buddhist sanctum in ancient times dedicated to Mahākāśyapa the first

patriarch of Dhyāna Buddhism. To this day there are some Buddhist sculptures in this temple. The tradition of twenty-eight patriarchs of Dhyāna Buddhism can be of Indian origin (898).

As for Japan, the Indian ambience is indeed very strong. Buddhist monasteries generally have Gaṇapati's icon for worship. Other Indian deities are also revered in this land. Lokesh Chandra quotes a Japanese text on the Goddess of Learning:

Sarasvatī is the compassionate Mother of all sentient beings. Her virtuous merits pervade the three thousand worlds. She bestows treasures. She is wondrous wisdom. She grants longevity and happiness. As she presides over music and eloquence, she is also called 'Beautiful-Sound Devi'. As she is a goddess of profit, virtues and knowledge she is also known as *Guṇa-devī*. She grants desires to those who pray for treasures or profits, eloquence or music, dexterity or wisdom (917).



Apsaras, Angkor Thom, Cambodia

Finally, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka. Ah, God's plenty. Having gone through the sumptuous volume and made sure it is within immediate reach for repeated readings, I received a clear and loud message: *Religion and spirituality cannot be separated from art*. One shudders to think what material the authors of this volume would have had to work with if it had only been a 'secular', atheist culture everywhere based on sheer materialism and utilitarianism. Fortunately, India has been the mother of all this cultural heritage. Even when Western materialism, based on science and technology, had been suffocating her like an incubus, Sri Ramakrishna could tell the young Narendra: 'Yes, I have seen God. I see Him as I see you here, only more clearly. God can be seen. One can talk to Him.' *The Cultural Heritage of India, Volume VII* amply demonstrates that God can be captured in stone, metal, paint, and calligraphy as well. ❧

# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



## ***A Spiritual Centre Blossoms: Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, First 100 Years (1904-2004)***

M S Nanjundiah

Ramakrishna Math, Bull Temple Road,  
Bangalore 560 019. E-mail: [rkmbblr\\_public@vsnl.net](mailto:rkmbblr_public@vsnl.net). 2007. xix + 454 pp. Rs. 400.

Every thought, word, and deed of the great ones has one predominant quality: a lasting impact. The ideas they disseminate and the works they set in motion continue to be valued for long. This is possible because their works meet the existential as well as developmental needs of society; and this includes the provision of cultural, moral, and spiritual haven.

The Ramakrishna Ashrama at Bangalore was one of the first centres of the Order, and its spiritual atmosphere was especially charged by Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's stay there in 1911. Swami Vivekananda had visited Mysore in his itinerant days and had expressed the view that 'Mysore will be in time a great stronghold'. Several other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna—Swamis Brahmananda, Ramakrishnananda, Abhedananda, Shivananda, and Vijnanananda—provided impetus to the spiritual growth of the centre through their visits and support. A galaxy of learned and austere monks, admirably aided by dedicated devotees belonging to all sections of society—from the erstwhile royal house of the Mysore state and its ministers, to pundits, to such people as Sri Adimulam who, as a child, was the recipient of Holy Mother's personal affection and blessings—have nourished this centre.

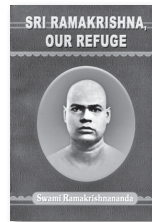
The author has been associated with the Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, for six decades. He has put in diligent and painstaking research in collecting a wealth of historical information as well as a large number of important photographs to record the remarkable story of the continued efflorescence of this important ashrama. Every ashrama and centre of service is to be gauged by its contribution to differ-

ent sections of society, and the inspiration that it provides. The Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, can boast of having nurtured many monks who dedicated their lives for the noble cause represented by the Ramakrishna movement. It has inspired householders to lead exemplary lives of service, encouraged youth to high idealism, fostered religious culture and music, served the destitute, sheltered students, and carried out educational and vocational training projects for the poor in the villages. The efforts on all these fronts have been clearly and carefully documented.

Printed on high quality art paper, with scores of colour photographs and appropriate narration, the volume speaks of no effort, time, or money being spared to put the story of this 'blossoming' on permanent record. Indians have long been charged with relegating their history to the outer fringes of the insignificant. Here we have an important story, well told and recorded. We wish other centres of the Ramakrishna Order could emulate this effort.

*Swami Satyamayananda*

Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata



## ***Sri Ramakrishna, Our Refuge***

Swami Ramakrishnananda

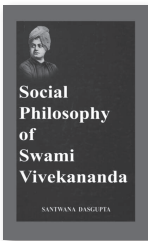
Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai 600 004. 2007. E-mail: [srkmath@vsnl.com](mailto:srkmath@vsnl.com). viii + 72 pp. Rs 18.

'Do you know what Sri Ramakrishna used to say?' Swami Ramakrishnananda—popularly known as Shashi Maharaj—once said while admonishing a young monastic inmate of the Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 'A blacksmith first puts a lump of iron into fire; when it becomes red hot, he puts it on the anvil and beats it into shape. ... All of you are like that unformed lump, and it is for your good that you are put to the forge and beaten into shape on the anvil by such scoldings.' If Shashi Maharaj was a strict disciplinarian and a hard taskmaster, he was also extremely solicitous of the welfare of all who came in contact with him. His



letters to Basanta (Swami Paramananda) given in this volume testify to this fact. As Sri Ramakrishna's apostle to the South, Shashi Maharaj was also directly involved in the important task of building up several Ramakrishna ashramas in South India. Some of the letters in this volume give a glimpse of his private interactions at that time. 'His letters are bound to have profound effect on all who go through them with some care and attention,' Swami Shivananda had written in his foreword to a 1927 edition of Shashi Maharaj's letters. This volume could surely have no better introduction.

PB



### **Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda**

Santwana Dasgupta

Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, Kolkata, 700 029. 2005. xx + 476 pp. Rs 160.

This is a fresh edition of the author's earlier work *Vivekananda: The Prophet of Human Emancipation*, and is divided into eight parts and thirty-one chapters. The author, an economist, has pursued this theme since 1940; this book is the culmination of her painstaking study.

The themes discussed include Vedanta and science; historical, sociological, political, and economic ideas of Swami Vivekananda; and his role in the socio-economic and cultural transformations in modern India. At no stage in the text does the author define the term 'social philosophy', though. The terms 'revolution' and 'revolutionary' have been used frequently; these could have been substituted by 'social regeneration'.

The context of Vivekananda's arrival on the national scene has been ably presented. To Vivekananda, man is the moulder of his own destiny, and he should engage in self-effort, self-reliance, and self-mastery. He envisages man as divine—as the infinite soul with infinite capacity and infinite possibility for becoming great and good. Religion, to him, is an attempt to go beyond nature, is 'being and becoming', 'realization', a higher stage of development. Such an approach to self, society, and nature is processual, and should not be mistaken as absolute or final. It is based on study, experience, and spiritual practice, and culminates in universal 'science-religion'. Divinity of man in such a model implies his supremacy over society and religion.

Dualism of spirit and matter is rejected by Vivekananda, and his social philosophy includes the concepts of (i) maya (ignorance), (ii) involution and evolution, and (iii) immanent change. Sorokin's view of reality is useful in understanding such a social philosophy. He considers three forms of being as important: (i) empirical-sensory, (ii) rational-minded, and (iii) super-rational or super-sensory (64). Any assessment of Vivekananda's philosophy and work on the empirical-sensory or rational planes alone, as is reflected in the views of Russian and Chinese scholars, will be inadequate. The contradictions that they discover are due to the inherent limitations of their cognitive models. Such contradictions, however, melt when practitioners of science and spirituality (mysticism) adopt a holistic approach for understanding reality and also for changing it. David Bohm has underscored the importance of understanding Eastern mysticism in order 'to attain an instant of scientific creation.' Stephen Hawking, however, considers it 'absolute rubbish' and 'the universe of Eastern mysticism as an illusion.' This shows that scientists and philosophers differ on the role of Eastern mysticism, and selections from the statements of those who are favourably disposed to it to support Vivekananda's views are not necessary.

In her essay 'Sociological Study of Religion' (*Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42/13 (March 31, 2007), 1089–94), Sujata Patel has cited social scientists who hold that 'Vivekananda's idea of "seva", the guru tradition, and the organizational structure of "sangathan", all three ... become models to incorporate non-savarna groups into a majority Hindu community'. While the contemporary Dalit movement has gained ascendancy reinterpreting Buddhism to develop a new model of society, it has not been mentioned even once by Santwana Dasgupta, although she has quoted Vivekananda's statement 'I am the servant of the servants of the servants of Buddha'.

Vivekananda's programme of education for the masses and women and the concept of social revolution through social action will find an echo in radical social work practice of modern times. The author rightly cites Vivekananda's statement that his first visit to the US was 'to find more means for the salvation of the poor of India' (324). But one would have also expected her to mention the outcome of such visits. Vivekananda emphasized introduction of Western technology and science for the development of industries for the removal of poverty, self-reliance, non-violent social reform, selfless service, and karma



yoga; which of these, if any, is to be attributed to his visit to the US?

Vivekananda's Vedantic society is a 'revolutionized society', and the Ramakrishna Mission is to carry out this revolution of regeneration. His concept of development includes availability of basic amenities, sense of self-esteem, and freedom; and his opposition to priestcraft and recognition of attitudinal and institutional change as prerequisites to alleviating poverty are noteworthy. Vivekananda's social philosophy is thus humanitarian, emancipatory, holistic, and well-evolved. Society is yet to embrace it fully; it is therefore still a vision and a Utopia. A higher level of social evolution and sustained effort is required to materialize it.

Reading this book, however, gives one the impression that the author has taken upon herself the task of defending Vivekananda against criticism of all kinds when he does not require any defence. Even otherwise, criticism is a part of philosophy. The author's claim that Vivekananda's 'knowledge of the social phenomenon—its evolutionary process, its past, present and future phases of development was complete' (15) is debatable. The use of such expressions as 'thundered', 'hitting at', and the like smacks of passion more than dispassionate analysis. Better editing to remove grammatical and typographical errors and the many repetitions would also help the reader, as would a subject index.

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**Swadeshi Movement  
in Bengal and  
Freedom Struggle of India**

Sankari Prasad Basu

Papyrus, 2 Ganendra Mitra Lane, Kolkata 700 004. 2004. 238 pp. Rs 250.

The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal sprang up as an instant, massive, and tumultuous reaction to the imperialist conspiracy to partition the then province of Bengal so that its politically explosive eastern part could be isolated from the relatively passive remainder. The volume under review is not just another addition to the already long list of literature available on the Bengal partition of 1905. It is the scholarly product of intense and critical research by an author who commands wide and respectful recogni-

tion of the reading public, here and abroad. Known particularly for his abundant contributions to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda-Nivedita literature, he has very appropriately placed the Swadeshi Movement in the wider perspective of nationalist upsurge and located its main inspirational source in the role and influence of the intrepid sannyasin and his fiery Irish disciple. An equally remarkable aspect of this work is the extensive documentation used to provide an objective analysis of two different facets of the contemporary colonial mindset of the Britishers. On the one hand, we have the anticipated ruthlessness of an occupying power; on the other, there is an amazing record of publicly expressed dissent of the British liberals. A precedent of sorts was thus created by British journalism in giving vent to both the irrational and the rational voices in the British society of those days. Readers get easy access to some of the relevant documents in the copious notes and appendix to this volume.

The maturing of what started as a purely regional outcry into a formidable movement of national proportions is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the 1905-11 episode. Interestingly, the author has explained it in terms of the 'new spirit' that had just seized the country. It is this spirit that demystified the colonial state and divested it of its superior aura while teaching the people to defy the institutionalized injustice forced on them by an alien power. This new spirit which, in due course, sparked off an uncompromising nationalism actually owed its origin to the electrifying call of Swami Vivekananda. He wanted every Indian to shake off sheepish submission, to acquire self-confidence, and to reject everything that was divisive, parochial, and exclusionist and hence mainly responsible for the plight of the motherland. The moral cudgel of a long overdue national regeneration could be taken up only by those who could identify themselves, as did Swamiji, with the downtrodden multitude, and worship them as the 'only God on earth'.

If the ultimate mantra of Swadeshi came from the lips and pen of Swamiji, the way to its political application was shown by Sister Nivedita, whose fearless activism provided the much needed ammunition to those on the revolutionary path. This has been acknowledged with profound respect by none other than Sri Aurobindo, who, as the author suggests, must have penned his famous pamphlet *Bhavanī Mandir* with Nivedita's *Kali the Mother* at the back of his mind. Indeed, the numerous writings of

Nivedita occupied a large portion of the contemporary revolutionary literature.

Lord Curzon defined the ultimate objective of partition thus: to deal the most comprehensive blow to Bengal's revolutionary proclivity. Worst of all, he mingled it with the venom of communalism in his ill-concealed eagerness to 'invest the Mohamedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Musalman viceroys and kings'. The Swadeshi movement was not merely a matter of public protest but one of mass retaliation directed right at the most sensitive spot of imperial rule—its entrenched commercial interest in exploiting the vast Indian market. The boycott decision spread like wildfire, and here too Sister Nivedita played a vital role in removing the two known deterrents to self-denying activism, family attachment and false spirituality. It was for Nivedita again to cure the moderate Indian leadership of their strange illusion about the so-called British sense of justice.

The manner in which Bengal registered its reaction was, however, remarkably civil and restrained. In the ultimate analysis, it was a test of strength at the end of which the wrongdoers had to undo the wrong. Whatever might have been the economic losses entailed by the movement, reunification brought in its train beneficial consequences in a different way. The people's political confidence touched an unprecedented high, partly as a result of the immediate success achieved but mainly due to the nationwide solidarity that grew out of the struggle. On the economic front too, regeneration of Indian industries, till then an academic proposition, started becoming a reality. In this context too one recalls in wonder the deep and painstaking interest by Sister Nivedita in the industrial reconstruction of India and also in fair distribution of the additional wealth so produced.

Swadeshi also gave rise to the strategy of passive resistance and perhaps anticipated its logical culmination in the existent activism. With the gradual withdrawal of the landed gentry and the comprador bourgeoisie from the mainstream movement, it developed a distinctly middle-class character. At the same time, the Swadeshi leaders started focusing their attention increasingly on the plight of workers, particularly in the Indian-owned enterprises. Evidently, this became a common cause of anxiety as much for the British imperialists as for the home-grown capitalists. Some of these unintended consequences of the Swadeshi movement have also been

related in this work with due objectivity.

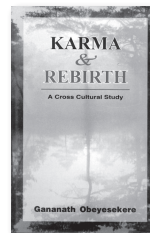
If, however, one is looking for the germination of an enduring spirit of nationalism from the social soil made fertile by the Swadeshi movement, one must focus one's attention on the knowledge-based expressions of national awakening that took place in the fields of science, education, literature, and fine arts. In each of these fields, autonomous forces arose insisting on and implementing alternative initiatives for achieving excellence in every sphere, independent of the motivated opportunities offered by the colonial masters. The author has devoted a fairly large chapter to the survey of these developments, which have been rightly categorized as a 'cultural renaissance'. It is highly instructive to go through this chapter and see the emergence of an astounding galaxy of talented men and women on the cultural horizon of post-Swadeshi Bengal.

Coming a hundred years after the movement, this is a valuable historical assessment of Swadeshi and its implications.

*Dr Radharaman Chakrabarty*

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***Karma and Rebirth:  
A Cross Cultural Study***  
Gananath Obeyesekere

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 U A Bungalow  
Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 062.  
E-mail: [mlbd@vsnl.com](mailto:mlbd@vsnl.com). 2006. xxx +  
448 pp. Rs 595.

Of religious beliefs, few are more perplexing than karma and rebirth. And Professor Obeyesekere is not one of those who just 'reincarnate' existing work. Though one gets the impression that he has bitten off more than it is possible to chew, there is a freshness and originality here which is incontestable. His agenda is quite clear: 'In this book, I examine three eschatologies that until now have not been put together in any kind of systematic comparative perspective: the rebirth doctrines of small-scale societies in various parts of the world, such as West Africa, Melanesia, the Northwest Coast Amerindians, and the Inuit (Eskimo); those in the Buddhist, Jaina, and other religions that flowered in the Ganges valley around the sixth century B.C.E.; and those of the Greeks of the Pythagorean tradition of roughly the same period, which culminated in the soteriological and cosmological thought of Plato and of Plotinus

in later times' (xiii).

This is a tough as also delicate job. For if the conclusions arrived at are unquestionable, it would mean that the theories of karma and rebirth are not exclusive to Indic traditions. Thus, says the professor, his 'initial rationale for embarking on this project was to justify *decentring India* as the home and ground of rebirth' (emphasis mine). Moreover, he adds, 'I go beyond my Buddhist prejudice to a vision of a larger purpose' to explore 'the common fate of those societies that ... through independent invention have come to believe in reincarnation as an integral part of religious faith' (xv).

The proposition is crystal clear. But for me, the equivocation of describing faith—which has observable effects on behaviour—as an 'invention' seems a predictable postmodern 'trick', and a 'construction'. It is also possible, as T S Eliot has wisely reminded us, that the very prejudices which one tries to disown or bypass may assert themselves in strange ways. Similarly, if the problem of origination is contingent on negation of a centre, how does one arrive at 'common fate[s]'? In other words, if there are decentred structures, how does one get a residual commonality? I had thought that in these days of decentred identities the 'commonality' route had been laid to rest as the 'in thing' of argumentative thinkers (not necessarily Indian) and that no 'centre' could hold today.

In seven chapters we are introduced to a wealth of detail painstakingly gathered and coherently argued. The first chapter is on 'Karma and Rebirth in Indic Religions'. The second is devoted to 'Non-Indic Theories of Rebirth'. The third is on Buddhist beliefs in which the advent of 'karmic eschatology' is linked to 'ethicization'. This is, in effect, the transformation of rebirth eschatology into 'karmic eschatology' of retribution and reward.

The highlight of the fourth chapter on 'The Buddhist Ascesis' is Prof. Obeyesekere's argument 'against a very powerful opinion among European scholars that Buddhism was "a rational region"', so that 'in India's general darkness Buddhism was the "light"' (151). This hardly fits in, says the professor, with the present activism of Buddhist monks—'actively participating in political and social events, sometimes encouraging violence, even practicing it on occasion' (159). And, more importantly, in Buddhism 'karma is the fantastic machine that churns out the gods and continuously populates the heavens with an overload of new denizens' (168). In short, with ethicization we have 'hedonistic heavens and

sadistic hells'! (173)

The fifth chapter focuses on the Greek theories as found in Pythagoras and Empedocles. These are 'rooted in a fundamental dualism that governs the universe, namely that of the limited (*peras*) and the unlimited (*apeiron*)' (208). The dualism is embodied in the 'aporia' of experiencing musical harmony even 'while one is living in the world of becoming' (212). Even at death, it is asserted, one continues to experience this harmony. And, all this in terms of the two frames of rebirth: 'a cyclical theory of continuity in which the individual is reborn on earth without an intermediate sojourn in a heaven or a hell' (232–3); and the myth of Er (in the final chapter of *The Republic*) 'based on the shamanic model of the soul's journey to the otherworld' and its return 'to the denizens living on earth' (241). Here also there are 'privileged ways', not merely of living (as we know and experience today), but of dying. The good go to heaven, the evil to hell. (And 'those who die in war go to heaven'—in times of rampant terrorism this is the least the dying can expect!)

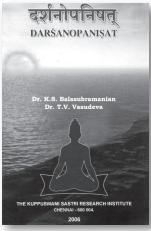
The two final chapters discuss related issues. What especially interested me was the discussion on 'immaculate conception'. The advent of artificial insemination and cloning certainly raises interesting issues (interesting, provided they do not rake up the ghost of 'pure Aryan blood'!)

The real significance of this study seems to lie in the insight that, in one way or the other, we have got to believe in karma (in the sense of fate which works itself out) and rebirth. More than being mere doctrines, these act as imperatives to survival in an imbalanced world of wantonly-fostered inequalities. Karma and rebirth are what make sense of our situation today. I would call them 'existential safety valves'.

It is to the credit of Prof. Obeyesekere's original and absorbing study that these two concepts acquire an unprecedented range and depth. But one has to flex one's intellectual muscles strongly to enter the field. I know now the reason why I survived reading Prof. Obeyesekere's classic, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (University of Chicago Press, 1984): only to experience the delight of tasting what it is to read another book like that. The general reader is likely to be rattled by the range; the specialist challenged, even as he or she is charmed by the professor's 'tour de force'.

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## **Darśanopani at**

Ed. and Trans.

Dr K S Balasubramanian and  
Dr TV Vasudeva

Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute,  
Mylapore, Chennai 600 004. 2006. xx  
+ 136 pp. Rs 70.

The Upanishads are the pinnacle of Indian philosophy. There are, apart from the ten principal Upanishads, several texts that gained acceptance as Upanishads in more recent times. *Darshana Upanishad* is one such minor Upanishad; it deals exclusively with the precepts and practices of Yoga. This edition presents the Sanskrit text, with simple English translation and detailed annotations.

A conversation between the great teacher Datatreya and his disciple Sankriti provides the context of this Upanishad. It enumerates the salient features of the eight limbs of Yoga in lucid language devoid of philosophical elaborations. What makes the text interesting is the Vedantic dimension given to the principles of Yoga, even as it deviates from Patanjali on both practical as well as philosophical issues. Each step of Yoga is defined in two ways—one based on traditional Yogic thought, the other in the light of Vedanta. For example, while ahimsa is defined as the penance of not inflicting injury through body, speech, and mind, it is also described as the knowledge of the soul—all pervasive, indivisible, and incomprehensible.

The first two sections enumerate the ten components each of the disciplines of *yama* and *niyama*, while the third explains nine varieties of *asana* (posture). We find an interesting account of different psychophysical entities like *nadi*, *kundalini*, and *prana*—their position, form, and functions, and also the deities associated with them—in the fourth section, which concludes with the call to identify oneself with Supreme Consciousness, viewing the body as a mere collection of nerves.

The fifth section discusses methods for purification of the *nadis* (psychophysical channels), and gives the Vedantic message that that person alone is truly pure who cleanses the mire of ignorance with the water of right knowledge. The technique and benefits of *pranayama* are explained in the sixth section. Next, *pratyahara* is defined as seeing everything as Brahman through determined withdrawal of the senses, the nature of which is to wander among objects. *Dharana* is concentration on the space that is situated at

the centre of one's body. In a higher sense, it involves concentration on the meaning of *pranava* or Om, which is the subtle cause of the whole of existence.

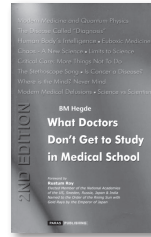
Meditation on Brahman, with and without attributes, is specified in the ninth section; both aspects are to be identified with one's own Self. The Upanishad concludes with a detailed account of samadhi in the tenth chapter. Right knowledge, where one identifies with all beings by experiencing non-dual Divine Consciousness, is termed samadhi.

The detailed notes offer the reader a comparative study of different Yoga works like Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, *Goraksha Samhita*, and *Hathayoga Pradipika*. The charts showing the positions of *nadis* and the movements of *vayus*, and the illustrations on *asanas*—all in accordance with the descriptions given in the Upanishad—makes this a work of more than mere academic interest. It is a practical guide for spiritual aspirants interested in the techniques of Yoga as guided by the teachings of Vedanta.

Swami Vireshananda

Editor, *Viveka Prabha*

Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore



## **What Doctors Don't Get to Study in Medical School**

B M Hegde

Paras, 5-1-475, First Floor, Putli-  
bowli, Hyderabad 500 095. E-mail:  
[parasmedpub@hotmail.com](mailto:parasmedpub@hotmail.com). 2007.  
387 pp. Rs 200.

The author, a medical professional, is finding fault with the medicine that is taught to students. He could write the same about physics, chemistry, biology, art, architecture, or philosophy, were he a teacher in any one of those fields. That there are limits to human rationality has been known since ancient times, and this makes human life interesting. At the same time, humans have found that reason can take them very far in both the material and the spiritual domains, stimulating creativity and growth. The limits of reason are reached through reason itself.

The author's arguments against medical science as it is practised today stand on very solid ground. The issues he raises include the following: (i) the motive of monetary profit influences the advancement of treatment modalities with limited rationality that are gobbled up by medical personnel (for reasons of profit, again), especially in the developing world; (ii) diseases like diabetes, hypertension, cardiac af-



fictions, degenerative illnesses, and bowel disorders have a large lifestyle component that is often ignored in their management; and these diseases are sometimes made worse by pharmacological and instrumental assault; (iii) the indigenous system of Ayurveda lays greater emphasis on positive health and on living in harmony with the environment, facts that we have forgotten; (iv) we treat cancers without full knowledge of their biological behaviour; (v) we are largely ignorant about the effects of mind on body; (vi) the logic of medical research assumes that all human bodies behave similarly; this may not be true; (vii) deaths and cures often occur unexpectedly, violating tenets of modern medicine; such cases have occurred throughout history and the reason often became apparent at a much later time.

The list is long. But, so far, we have also been unable to know the ultimate secrets of the physical universe with our reason. So what do we do? Should we give up reason and return to the dark ages? The human body and mind are as much a mystery as is physical reality.

Let us look at the credit side. Modern medicine has contributed significantly to the improvement in life expectancy over the last hundred years, though public health measures have also played major role. Many marauding epidemic infections have been controlled, and we have the knowledge and expertise to effectively face newer threats. Emergence of drug-resistant pathogens has been unable to offset that gain so far. We had learnt to control our environment for profit; now we are learning to make it friendly. We are just beginning to learn the effects of mind on body in health and disease, and the applications are coming. These are real and reproducible gains.

Many years back I saw a monk with diabetes, extensive coronary artery disease, and severe angina. Surgical intervention was clearly indicated, but he refused. Five years later I found him hale and hearty, able to walk miles. I asked him the secret and got only a smile. More than a decade later he continues to be well. But this experience has not led to any alteration in my advice to other patients. Today we do know about spontaneous regression of coronary artery disease, the role of psychological factors and of controlled exercise in preventing heart attacks; and this has been possible through controlled observations. Should we not teach students the logic of science and method of rigorous reasoning, which is difficult to imbibe anyway, instead of confusing them at the very beginning of their professional journey?

In an opening chapter the author writes: 'Let us think of keeping society tranquil and promoting its health.' How do we do that through medical science?

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National Medical College, Kolkata



## **Tattvabodha: Volume I**

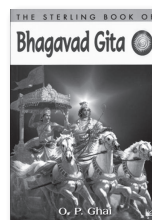
Ed. Sudha Gopalakrishnan

National Mission for Manuscripts, 5 Rajendra Prasad Road, New Delhi 110 001.  
Co-published by Munshiram Manoharlal, 54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055. E-mail: [mrml@vsnl.net](mailto:mrml@vsnl.net). 2006. xii + 164 pp. Rs 325.

India is reputedly the largest repository of handwritten manuscripts in the world—with an estimated holding of five million. The National Mission of Manuscripts was launched in 2003 to 'identify, document, digitize, preserve and render accessible' this precious heritage. Dissemination of knowledge about this heritage—through seminars, lectures, and scholarly discussions—is also on the Mission's agenda. This volume is a compilation of the first series of lectures on this project. It brings together the reflections of such scholars as Lokesh Chandra, Irfan Habib, Sheldon Pollock, Kapila Vatsyayan, R Champakalakshmi, M S Valiathan, and D P Chattopadhyaya. The global dissemination of manuscripts, the knowledge systems—science, philosophy, arts, and culture—and linguistic traditions they cover, as well as their historical and contemporary relevance are all part of these discussions. Scholars have also argued persuasively for inclusion of oral and dramatic traditions within the ambit of this project. Anyone interested in Indic knowledge traditions should be following this series keenly.

PB

## **BOOK RECEIVED**



## **The Sterling Book of Bhagavad Gita**

O P Ghai

New Dawn Press, A 59 Okhla Industrial Area, Phase II, New Delhi 110 020. E-mail: [info@sterlingpublishers.com](mailto:info@sterlingpublishers.com). 2007. 119 pp. Rs 99.

A simple translation of the Gita by one who has been inspired by it to make the right choice in difficult situations and is convinced that it will do the same for the readers too.

# REPORTS

